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FROM

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W H I T E W A S H

"'HE'S AN ENGLISHMAN, I'LL WAGER A FRANC.'"

(*See page 20*)

WHITEWASH

By ETHEL WATTS MUMFORD

Author of "Dupes," "Partners," etc.

Illustrated by
A. G. LEARNED

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WHITEWASH

PROLOGUE

THE July sun blazed unrelentingly upon the wide, hard-baked road that led, straight as a giant ruler, across the forlorn level country. Gorse and stubble, ground-pine and intensely green, wiry broom covered the moors, from which a quivering radiance of heat mounted to the molten sky, the horizon shook with it, and the distant dome of the Basilica of St. Anne of Auray, with its golden statue, wavered upward like a white flame.

It was St. Anne's Eve, and the incoming human tide was near its flood. The following day would bring the great feast, when the cure-working statue would be carried in procession. The throng

pushed forward in anticipation. Here were ancient and dilapidated diligences, called into service by the influx of visitors, carts, drays, carriages of all ages and previous conditions of servitude, heavy, high swinging landaus, with emblazoned panels, bringing the chatelaines of the neighborhood, even the pumping, banging automobiles that all fashionable France had gone mad over. Mixed in and about the carriage pilgrims came the rank and file of foot farers: men from Beltz, with white trousers and coats of peacock blue; women of Lorient, in the dress made famous by the "chocolatière" of Dresden; peasants of Pont-Aven in their pleated collars and wide-winged head-dresses; deputations from Morlaix, wearing the fifteenth century "hénin" in all its glory; women of Point l'Abbé, broad-shouldered and square-hipped, marching through the heat in multitudinous black cloth skirts and yellow embroidered jackets. And in all alike, men, women, and children, the deep, contained fire of fanatic faith.

An ancient and dilapidated vehicle of the period of the first Empire, driven by a pompous peasant

of Auray, in full regalia, swung from side to side in the jostling mass, like a distressed ship in a human sea. Reclining on the threadbare velvet cushions, four girls, of obviously foreign extraction, volleyed with assorted cameras on the crowd about them. Many shrank from the black boxes in fear of witchcraft, others, more experienced in the ways of strangers, grinned broadly or became suddenly petrified into awkwardness. From their coign of vantage the cameras continued to snap with regardless vehemence.

"Hold on, stop the driver! I want to take that ditch full of horrors," exclaimed the smallest of the quartette, a slim, blonde girl of eighteen or twenty, who answered cheerfully to the nickname of "Shorty."

A red-haired young woman rose from her seat.

"Oh, gorgeous person on the box-seat, have the obligeance to restrain Bucephalus."

The peasant grinned, and obeying her gesture, which was the only thing he understood, caused so sudden a halt, that the occupants of the Empire coach fell violently into each other's arms. Upon the stopping of the carriage, an immediate con-

gestion of pedestrians and horses took place in the rear, and the pilgrimage was profaned by remarks not intended for the ears of St. Anne.

With true American independence the four girls calmly proceeded to focus their kodaks at the line of writhing wretches, who, seeing the attention they were attracting, dragged themselves nearer, whining dolorously.

"For goodness sake, move on! the smell is positively fetid!" exclaimed a brown young woman of about thirty.

"Boston, you are a born obstructionist. Get out of my picture, will you? There are horrors enough in it without you."

Of the four, Victoria Claudel was, perhaps, the most noticeable. As she often said of herself, "she was made up of odds and ends." Her small, well-shaped head was set on a full, strong throat. She had very wide shoulders, a tremendous depth of chest, suggestive of great vitality, feet unusually small, and well-formed hands, unexpectedly large. The face that shone out from the shade of a battered campaign hat showed the same irregularity — a short, straight nose, large,

oblique gray eyes, and a small, dainty mouth in a strong jaw. The forehead was somewhat high, and from it sprung, variously "cowlicked" and very unruly, a great mass of red-black hair, part of which crowning glory was at that moment attempting a descent upon her shoulders, and hung in a loop besprinkled with helpless hairpins. She was not beautiful, but far more than pretty. Vitality, power, vigorous impatience, and ingrained humor seemed to surround her as an atmosphere rings its planet.

Victoria put down her camera and distributed a handful of coppers among the pilgrim subjects.

"Give me change for a franc?" the red-haired Sonia Palintzka begged.

"Can't do it," Victoria returned. "Change it when you get to the hotel. I believe you are a reincarnation of Judas — I never knew you when you weren't trying to change your thirty pieces of silver."

Shorty fell over her companions in her haste. "Oh, look! See those peasants with the apple-green sleeves and the blue bodices. Heavens!

he's going to run them down, and they are so beautiful!"

The older woman disengaged herself from the tangle of Shorty's skirts. "You are perfectly insane, child; do sit still! You've taken at least four pictures without winding one off."

The girl gasped, "Oh, I believe you're right! Oh, dear! my beggars will be spoiled."

"They seemed pretty far gone already," Boston ejaculated.

Their carriage halted for a moment. A balky horse somewhere in the crowd ahead was determinedly holding back the procession. The crush had moved the Empire chaise alongside a well-appointed, green-bodied brougham, from whose window a slim woman, dressed in mourning, was anxiously leaning.

"It must be horribly dark inside the lady," murmured Victoria, in an undertone: "see how it pours out of her."

Sonia nodded, the description was so apt. Great troubled, black eyes lit up the woman's haggard face; bushy brows almost met over the thin, high-bred nose; hair so intensely black that the widow's

cap surmounting it seemed lighter by comparison; even her skin was seared as if by fire, yellow brown as it met the raven locks, like burned parchment. All this darkness seemed to emanate from the eyes — two tunnels of Erebus that led inward to depths incalculable.

Conscious of scrutiny, the lady raised her head. The anxiety of her face froze to haughty annoyance, and she withdrew from the window abruptly.

"Snapping turtle!" Shorty remarked.

Victoria smiled. "Did look that way. See the child with her — she's ill. I suppose they are bringing her to St. Anne."

A fair-haired girl, dressed in black and thin to emaciation, lay in the other corner of the carriage. Her little feet rested on the lap of a maid who sat opposite, holding a smelling-bottle in one hand. As if in obedience to a command, the servant leaned forward and sharply drew down the green silk window-shade, darting, as she did so, a look of unconcealed scorn at Sonia's unaffectedly interested face.

"End of Act I. — curtain!" said Victoria.

A sway and jar in the packed roadway announced that at last progress was possible. The interrupted tramp of the march again began. Somewhere in the front a chorus of men's voices intoned the ancient Breton chant of St. Anne. It spread from rank to rank, as fire whips across a prairie, till the whole throng rocked with it — an immense emotional swell.

Vic's face paled a little, and she shook her shoulders as if to throw off the hysterical contagion of the crowd.

Sonia looked sympathy. "Grips one right by the throat, doesn't it?"

There was no more stopping now. The procession in its compact thousands advanced as if lifted bodily. The weary straightened themselves, the sick lifted their heads, the eyes of the dying lit once more.

"Makes one understand the crusades," Shorty murmured, tearfully.

The resistless stream poured on to its destination, spreading out as it reached the vast paved square in front of the church, and the green acres before the Scala Santa.

The three great doors of the Basilica, opened wide, could hardly accommodate the crowd that surged toward them. The square reeked with the smell of wax candles and the perfume of incense. Up and down every converging street, and bordering the square itself, hung a deep fringe of booths — literally a fringe, for from every roof depended bunches of blessed tapers of every size and quality, from the simple one-sou candle, a foot in length, to the great decorated "cierge," four feet high and as big around as a hand could grasp. Black and yellow festoons of prayer-beads swung to and fro, rattling as the heads of purchasers displaced them. At every booth brilliantly dressed peasants bargained cannily for medals and "pocket saints."

The Empire chaise with its modern occupants drew up before the door of the largest inn, facing directly on the place. It was preceded by the green-bodied brougham, from which the maid, assisted by the landlord, was lifting the invalid. The deference with which the party was treated marked them as people of importance, and Vic-

toria wisely concealed her impatience till the illustrious wants should be ministered to.

"We engaged our rooms weeks ago, so we're all right, you know," she said, "and they'll treat us better if we don't fluster them in handling their grandees. Suppose we sit out here at one of the little tables till the coast is clear."

Settling themselves, they eagerly watched the crowd that wove its brilliant patterns before them.

"Jolly, isn't it?" Shorty commented. "We are the only rank outsiders. Evidently the great American tourist hasn't found this out yet."

"Give them time — they will — sooner or later," Miss Bently announced, sadly; "to-morrow there will be more — that man over there, for instance; he's an Englishman, I'll wager a franc."

"Done," and Victoria held out her hand. "No Englishman would be so fearfully and wonderfully British."

"I don't see how we're to find out," said Shorty, wistfully.

"He's going into the hotel, — we'll ask the

chambermaid what room he has, and look it up on the register."

"But," objected the Russian, "there won't be what you call a register here, only those miserable little slips you have to make out and hand to the landlord — how old you are and where you were born, and what for, and who filled your teeth and where you think you'll go to when you die, — and all sorts of little personalities that might interest the police."

"That's so," Shorty nodded, gravely. "Never mind, though, we'll find out; there is always somebody who makes it his business to know everybody else's."

"Very handsome sentence. Did you make it all yourself?" Victoria grinned. "Come in, it's safe now to tackle the hotel, they have disposed of the — the — what's feminine for *hidalgo?*"

Their entrance into the inn in their turn brought sorrow. The landlord remembered perfectly the correspondence with the young ladies, but what was he to do? Madame de Vernon-Château-Lamion had just arrived, bringing her little daughter to the good St. Anne. She had re-

quired the best rooms — as he said before, what could he do? It was vexatious; but the child was ill, very ill.

Sonia flushed and drew herself up. It was at such moments that she gave ground for the suspicion current in the artistic circles she frequented, that concealed under her simple incognito was a name as illustrious as the Orloffs' own. "My good man," she articulated, as she quenched the fire of his eloquence by an icy glance, "you are under contract to accommodate us. If the child is ill, we will not insist on our rights; but accommodate us you must, somewhere. You know perfectly well the conditions here during the feast. We have no intention of sleeping in the square with the peasants, or doing the 'Stations of the Cross' on our knees all night in the church. Now, what are you going to do?"

The landlord looked up at her stately height, at the gold glory of her hair, at the violet fire of her eyes — and wilted.

"Madame — mademoiselle must pardon. It is unfortunate, but perhaps, if the ladies would be graciously lenient — there were — rooms — oh,

not the kind he wished he might provide — but rooms — one in the wing, where two of *ces dames* could stay — and one " — he hesitated, and fairly gasped — " over the — the stable."

Sonia's manner was magnificent. As a queen might condescend to accept a lowly state that humbler subjects cavilled at, because, being queen, she dignified whatever lodging she deigned to honor, she inclined her head. " Take us there," she said, " and let Madame Vernon-Château-Lamion know that because of the illness of her child we will permit her to occupy our apartments."

The fat little landlord gulped, and humbly led the way to the dingy hospitality he offered.

" Too bad we can't be together," Shorty wailed, as she inspected the cubby-hole in the wing.

Once more the host, by this time reduced to positive pathos, clamored his excuses.

Sonia silenced him. " This lady," indicating Victoria, " and I will occupy the stable." Again they journeyed through a labyrinth of passages to the much-scorned chamber, which proved to be better than its promise. It was, at least, clean

and roomy, and the two little hospital cots looked comfortable enough. Its simple dormer-window commanded an uninspiring view of courtyard and barn, the slope of the roof being not so great but one might step out on it with safety, or, in case of necessity, slip across to the iron ladder that posed as fire-escape for the part of the hotel buildings adjoining the lofts. This much, the American girl's hasty inspection took in as she put down her simple baggage. Sonia, glancing through the dim window-glass, commented on the ease with which one might cross from one part of the house to another by judicious use of water-pipes and roofs. "It is to be hoped," she concluded, "that pilgrims are uniformly pious, otherwise a burglar would have what you call a 'picnic' of this house."

Victoria, deep in tepid ablutions, sputtered something about willingly parting with everything but her kodak films; but Sonia persisted:

"These are servants' quarters, or hostlers'. I don't think it is right to put such people in a room like this that has window communication with every back room in the house — yes, and

probably every front one, too, for one would have only to cross the roof and use the balconies."

"Oh, come, trust the Breton hostlers; they haven't imagination enough to think of anything so complicated, and unless, Sonia, you are contemplating a little burglarious expedition, *we're* safe enough."

Victoria wiped her hands on the diminutive towel, twisted her short skirt straight, stuffed in a handful of strong hairpins, and announced her intention of going out. Her companion slowly left the window, went through the same feminine recipe for "straightening up," and patted her friend's shoulder with impulsive irrelevance.

"Vic, you are a nice girl. I wish you would come to Russia with me this winter instead of going back to America."

Her friend smiled. "Wish I could, Sonia, but I've got to go, there's no getting out of it. It's business, you see. There will be a settling of the estate — Bob comes of age."

Sonia locked the door as they went out into the cheerless corridor that smelt not unpleasantly of hay and fodder. "Well, perhaps I'll come to

America instead. I've always wanted to see what it is like."

"If you do, Sonia, I'll give you the best time you ever had in all your life. As a country, well, I don't like to be unpatriotic — you'll be disappointed; but the people make up for it — they are the whitest in the world." The gray eyes looked unutterable admiration into space.

They reached the staircase after much wandering, and descended to the floor below, turned toward the main entrance, and came face to face with the plaided, knickerbockered young man, whose back had attracted their comment. Victoria, because of her bet, favored the stranger with a long comprehensive stare as he passed. He was undeniably handsome, with fine, regular features, yellow hair concealed by a gray cap, very black eyes and eyebrows that contrasted strangely with his light mustache. He walked gracefully in spite of a slight limp.

"He is English," Sonia asserted, when well out of earshot.

Victoria shook her head. "I don't think so. I'm sure I don't know why, but I don't."

The Lorient-coifed chambermaid appeared burdened with towels and full of business. The girl confronted her. "Do you know who the young man is who just went up-stairs? He looks like some one I know, but I can't be sure."

"Oh, yes — fifty — seven." The woman patted the towels gently, as if struggling to remember among the press of patrons. "Fifty-seven — fifty-seven — came yesterday — had a headache and his dinner in his room. I think he went out awhile ago, but he didn't stay long. Seems to be expecting somebody from the way he sits by the window. English? — of course. You should hear him speak French." She laughed. "His name? I don't know — oh, yes, his bag has 'J. O'Farrell' marked on it; it's a cheap bag," and with this information she proceeded on her way.

"That settles it — you've lost," said Sonia.

"I suppose I have." Victoria's voice was puzzled and unconvinced.

As they emerged into the street, Shorty pounced upon them. "Come quick! There's a whole band of women from Faouët going to have

their sickles blessed. Oh, it's too bad the light is going, I can't get a picture. It's fine, it's wonderful!"

Miss Bently's flat brown figure frantically beckoned them to hasten, and the three ran forward to the stone wall on which she stood, commanding a view of the church doors over the swaying heads of the crowd. A band of thirty or more women were forming in line, their black skirts kilted high, showing heavy ribbed stockings and wooden shoes. Their hard, weather-worn faces framed in the black triangular shawls that hung from under round black caps, similar to those worn by the priests of the Greek Church. In their hands they held new sickles, some naked and gleaming, some wrapped in wisps of wheat straw. Some argument of precedence was evidently in progress, which, being at last compromised, the strange procession disappeared under the sculptured arches of the portico.

"Where is the miraculous fountain, Shorty?" Sonia inquired, as the thinning crowd permitted them to descend from their perch.

"Over here. Follow me; it's a sight; Boston and I have been prospecting."

Elbowing their way across the "place," by the medal-sellers, and the mushroom villages of candlemongers, they became involved in a temporary street of cider tents, wherein, bronzed and bedecked, the men of Brittany, like men the world over, comforted first the body before grappling with that illusive and unsatisfactory thing — the soul. Under the brown sail awnings they sat, on long oak benches, drinking gravely and without noise, as is the fashion of that strange race, that takes all its pleasures, even dancing, as if Weltschmerz were the impulse. They regarded the foreigners with amiable curiosity, commenting aloud and unabashed in their rough, guttural Celtic, which is identical with the ancient and fast-disappearing language of Cornwall. To the right of the Scala Santa, the four came upon the fountain, a large and inartistic stone monument, presenting to the public a huge sign, "Beware of pickpockets," and four granite shells, from which the water flowed through sunken cisterns, resembling the tanks of a natatorium. Wide stone steps

led down, and every available inch of the approaches was crowded by the faithful, old and young, high and low, bonnet and coif together. The sightless washed their eyes in the healing waters, diseased skins were laved in it, open sores and wounds were soothed and cleansed, the idiotic were baptized, those sick of internal troubles lifted it to their lips and drank. The relatives of those too ill to come filled bottles from the pools, corked them, and preciously carried them away in their arms. The crowd of worshippers constantly renewed itself, as those satisfied rose to their feet and departed with hope in their hearts and microbes in their systems. For the most part, the throng was earnest and silent. Once only a woman shrieked, casting the bandages from her wounded head. Her eyes, burning with fever, stared like two mad stars in her haggard, drawn face, as she struggled with her stalwart sons, who at last led her away, muttering and calling. A momentary hush fell upon the crowd at the fountain, a shade of doubt crept from face to face as the sound of the woman's ravings grew

fainter, then, with renewed vigor, they washed and bottled and drank.

"And the miracle is," Victoria said, slowly, "that they won't all die before morning."

Miss Bently turned from the scene a trifle pale. "It *is* rather sickening, but I suppose if you get a good new microbe to fight your own bacilli, they have a chance of killing each other. I don't doubt there are any number of cures from that cause."

"I'm coming down to-morrow morning early," Shorty announced, "to photograph that. No one would believe us if we told about it — it's too unspeakably awful."

"Look at this, girls," Sonia interrupted, pointing to a billboard, on which, amidst the usual notice to "Beware of pickpockets," were the announcements of special indulgences — "For each step of the Scala Santa on the knees with two 'Aves' and 'a Pater,' one hundred years of purgatory remitted; for the entire Scala, ten thousand years; 'Stations of the Cross,' with 'Paters,' and 'Aves,' one thousand years."

"Haven't you seen those before?" Shorty ex-

claimed, with superiority. "There's a beautiful framed announcement at the foot of the holy stairs, which are just jammed full of people taking advantage of the indulgences. It makes one's knees sore to see them. Heavens! there's a whole covey of Englishwomen over there."

"Oh, that reminds me," Victoria spoke up, "I lost my bet, Boston, my love. We asked the chambermaid about the man you thought was English. It seems his name is O'Farrell, and he speaks very bad French, so I suppose that settles it — but," and she shook her head, "somehow it doesn't go; maybe he's half-and-half, perhaps his mother was French or Italian, or something. I flatter myself I'm a good guesser, and certainly he does not spell 'English' to me."

"Oh! you're too sharp," Shorty laughed, as they returned to the hotel entrance.

They had hardly crossed the threshold when they became aware of the advancing presence of the swarthy Madame Vernon-Château-Lamion. With a well-bred haughtiness she inclined her dark head, and addressed herself directly to Sonia, including Victoria in the same glance. Boston

and Shorty she ignored magnificently, turning by instinct to her social equals.

"I am informed that I am indebted to you ladies for the suite I now occupy. I assure you that were it not for my daughter's critical condition I should at once seek lodgings elsewhere. As it is, I must, most unwillingly, impose upon your kindness."

"Madame," returned Victoria, "we are glad to contribute to your daughter's comfort."

"We trust," added Sonia, with unexpected gentleness, "that your prayers for her may be heard."

The mother crossed herself. "May God so will! My thanks!" she added, with a return of her frigid politeness, and with another slight bow she left them.

"What a very aristocratic old blackbird," remarked Shorty, after a pause, piqued that her blonde prettiness had attracted no acknowledgment of her existence from the gaunt countess.

"Yes," Sonia gravely assented, "she has blue blood, as you say."

"I don't say anything of the sort," Miss Bently

sharply objected. "I should, from her appearance, suggest Caw's Jet Black Ink, or stove polish."

Though early, the dining-room was already crowded, which necessitated an irritating wait, but the four were at last settled at a small table, and the conversation returned to the countess.

"Did you see the lace she wore? Antique Venetian, and a gem of a piece!" Victoria spoke with a sort of detached envy.

Sonia nodded. "Yes; but what made me want to break the — what number Commandment is it, about envy? — was her pin. Did you notice it?"

"Rather!" and Victoria's face glowed with appreciation. "What was it? I never saw anything like it."

"Nor I," continued Sonia, "though I've seen — " Here she checked herself, and added, lamely, "a great deal. It was sixteenth century, I'm certain. Those pendants were unmistakable; and I think I never saw such an emerald — the size, the color!"

"It had a big flaw, though," and Victoria took

up the description. "It was the marvellous delicacy of the setting and the design that struck me. I don't believe its intrinsic value is so great, even with the emerald, but the art of it, the art of it! It makes the modern work seem absolutely pot-boiling; there were old masters in jewelry as well as in paint and stone."

"I think," Sonia continued, "the two gold dolphins that surround the centre stone must have been heraldic. I believe it was a sort of acrostic of a coat-of-arms. I've seen such pieces in Russia, and I know they were used in Spain."

"Oh, stop talking like a pair of antiquaries," Shorty interrupted. "You don't know anything about it, and you're missing the circus — just look at the freaks in this — salle à manger."

The great bare room did, in fact, present an extraordinary assortment of humanity. At the upper end, a long table accommodated fifteen or twenty priests, whose black garments made a dark spot in the otherwise bright hall. Next to them, a gaily dressed, chattering party of women and men, just arrived in their automobiles from the estates of Kerkonti and Merone. The

main body consisted of wealthy Breton peasants, dressed in all the gorgeousness of their feast-day clothes, and obviously uncomfortable. Here and there the inevitable, fat, greasy, commercial traveller serenely bulked, and the equally fat and oily bourgeoise-women shopkeepers of Lorient, and the other adjoining commercial cities, wielded ready knives. A few elegant but soberly dressed families attested that the aristocracy of France is by no means devoid of the faith that animated its distant forbears. An eminent journalist from Paris took notes obviously from his position by the fireplace, a well-known painter, accompanied by his equally well-known model, sat in the corner. A lonesome looking English boy, who was "doing" Brittany on his wheel, yawned by the window, and a party of very old gentlemen, who seemed to have no particular reason for attending the festival, unless, as Victoria suggested, they hoped for a Faust-like renewal of youth, completed the company.

"I don't see my Englishman," Miss Bently observed.

"Evidently his headache has come on again,

and he's having his supper in his room. The chambermaid said he hadn't been well," Sonia explained.

The meal dragged on indefinitely, the frantic serving-wenches vainly trying to cope with the number of their charges. Every dish was cold or poor. Soup arrived after the meat, and vegetables with the pudding. But there was little objection. Every one was either too devout or too interested to trouble about food for the time being. The four dissimilar girls were probably as much of an incongruity as the other guests or the distorted meal. Theirs was one of those oddly combined friendships, evolved in studios, with which all dwellers in France have become familiar. At bottom there is always the stratum of common ambitions, appreciation, and Bohemianism, in spite of unbridgeable divergencies of character and traditions.

Just now the four were equally delighted. Miss Bently and Sonia with the paintable qualities of the pilgrimage; Shorty, with the photographic possibilities, and Victoria with the human passion of excitement and faith that ran riot in and about

her. Although her training had been in the field of applied art, she was slowly but certainly turning toward the alluring fields of literature, her short experience with newspaper work having bred ambitions. Now, unconsciously, she groped for words into which to translate the pictures and the emotions of the hour, and went about with sentences speaking themselves in her head — so good sometimes that she longed to jot them down, yet never quite dared because of a curious self-consciousness that made her hate to explain her occupation to her companions. "Hysteria, the most instantly contagious of diseases," she caught herself murmuring, as, supper finished, they again sought the square and its picturesque gatherings. "I wonder, if it is possible for any one in his senses to remain unmoved by such an immense and intensely human cry of faith — the faith of the children, and catered to as to children." What marvellous charm was in the lights, the incense, the fountain of healing, the fairy-tale statue discovered, though buried, because of the great radiance that shone over the spot! What mattered it that antiquarians

had pronounced it a Venus, relic of the Roman occupation? Converted into St. Anne and recarved, no saint in Christendom is more efficacious to cure — "as bread pills cure a child," she concluded, aloud. Surprised to hear her own voice, she looked up. She had become separated from her friends, and had somehow drifted to the church door. Impulsively, she entered and knelt for a moment, the better to take in the mystery of the great building, whose mighty pillars sprang upwards like giant spouts of water, and spread across the arched ceiling in a spray of lacy stone. The lights were dim, but below, by the great white altar, by the side chapels and at each pillar foot, thousands upon thousands of candles sent up a radiance mellowed and softened in the immensity of the nave.

The darkness of confessionals and recessed chapels was gemmed with colored lamps, that vaguely showed the lines of waiting penitents. The place reeked with incense, the odor of melted wax and the vague heaviness of crowded human breaths.

The subdued shuffling of feet, the audible

heart-throb of prayer shook the air. Victoria was glad to be here, to throw herself into the immensity of this sea of faith — herself unbelieving. Only by an effort could she free herself from the mocking of her judgment, and she longed, yearned, to experience the exaltation of the least of these sun-tanned, ignorant tillers of the soil, or the still more romantic faith of those who plough the sea, and sow the wave-furrows with their lives and hopes. The votive ships that hung dimly overhead filled her with visions of the shipwrecks they commemorated, the hairbreadth escapes to which they attested by their presence in the sanctuary. St. Anne's shrine glowed in its concentrated mass of candles, a very saint's glory. The legended statue stood all golden, on the lower table of the altar, where kissing lips might reach the daintiness of the embroidered cloth. The church shook with the dim resonance of chimes, swung far overhead in the bell-tower. The throng, she observed, was lighting tapers at the shrine, and she became aware that each of the pilgrims crowding at her side carried a candle protected by a folded, funnel-

shaped paper, stamped with the images of St. Anne and the Virgin. As the lights shone through the mellow translucence of the parchment, they seemed a sudden florescence of myriad calla lilies of miraculous radiance. Through the door of the chapel, into the open starlit night, the pilgrims poured, the procession carrying her along with it. She disengaged herself for a moment, and rather shamefacedly purchased a candle, and begged a light from her neighbor, a tottering old woman, the white bands of whose coif were hardly less pale than the face they framed.

The waiting seemed endless in the crowded night, filled with snatches of hymns and songs. All was swaying life and excited unrest except the quiet, unmoved stars overhead. Then the vast illuminated procession heaved under way. Once more the chant that had brought the pilgrims to their journey's end in the afternoon burst forth, both from the candle-bearers and the dense black human hedge that lined the route.

Gradually the exaltation of Victoria's mood faded. In its place the artist and the journalist

awoke. How could it be described? What words could ever bring the look of it before other eyes? What color, what inspiration of the brush, could reproduce one atom of it? Unconscious of her actions, she quenched the flame of her taper, stepped from the ranks of the procession, and, absorbed into the onlooking multitude, watched with the interest of her whole complex sensitiveness, the multitude that streamed by in the glow of the tapers.

Wonderful! Compelling! the expressions on those peasant faces, thrown into sharp relief by the lights that burned beneath and around them. The intense realism of a Holbein, the shadowed depths of Rembrandt, the unearthly, grotesque force of Dürer, and more, more, even the rapt, enthralled enthusiasm of Fra Angelico, would be necessary to render their power. And yet, it was not to be done! Oh, the centuries bridged by those faces under the mediæval head-dresses! This was no nineteenth century. That ecstatic woman's head, in its halo of illuminated linen convolutions, must be fresh risen from some carven tomb, where its marble counterpart lies staring blankly at the

Gothic arches overhead. These men and women around her — were they not ghosts of those serfs of ancient days, unchanged in manner, dress, or speech? It was all old, unspeakably old, a mirage of what had disappeared over the horizon of memory.

The procession turned. Victoria, still in her dream, followed slowly. Where was she being led, she wondered vaguely; back to the tombs into which the ghostly multitude must descend and disappear until evoked again by the feast of souls or the intercession of St. Anne?

Into the vast reverberating depths of the church they poured once more, through its echoing aisles, past its blinding altar — out again through the connecting porches into the great cloisters of the monastery. In the centre of the lantern-lighted court a gigantic crucifix lifted its head, from which, with horrible realism, a life-size figure of Christ leaned, bleeding. Choir-boys in red and white swung censers to and fro.

The high, nasal tenor of a priest's voice intoned alone for a moment; then the responses broke from the multitude with the roar of breaking

surf. Again the tenor of the priest, again the deep, growling bass of the crowd. The mass continued, and the memory of it remained with Victoria all her life. The smell of incense, the thin, penetrating voice, the wave thunder of the litanies. A vision of weird, illuminated faces and dimly revealed arches, of a pale, far-off, star-sprinkled sky, against which the martyred Christ silhouetted, grimly rigid. The chimes rang out, — paused, — and the single bourdon throbbed the hour. Victoria, to her amazement, counted twelve. Where had the time gone? It seemed hardly an hour since she slipped into the church. There was no apparent diminution of the crowd, and the enthusiasm continued at white heat. She became suddenly conscious that she was weary and footsore. Her excited nerves relaxed almost to the crying point. It was as if the stroke of midnight had destroyed the enchantment.

Too tired to take any further interest in her surroundings, her feet and thoughts turned gratefully hotelwards. The narrow cot at her journey's end suddenly absorbed all her ambitions and hopes. With lagging steps she made her way

out of the cloisters, and wearily crossed the square, still vaguely filled with rumor — a ghostly reminiscence of the day's tumult. When she reached the hotel office it was deserted; every one was out-of-doors, apparently. She found a candle and dragged herself up the long winding stairs and through the dark passages, guided by instinct and the smell of hay, to the little corridor connecting the main building with the lofts. Her room door gave as she touched it, but no light shone from within, and suddenly Sonia, her hair falling about her ears, her eyes wide with excitement, stood before her. Only an instant the vision lasted, her candle was extinguished, and Sonia's voice gave warning in a whisper:

"Be quiet! Somebody is coming over the roofs!"

In the darkness the two girls stood listening. The noise of bells in the square came vaguely to them. But distinct, though muffled, rasped the sound of some one walking cautiously over the tiles. Softly the girls crept to the window, and standing well back, could make out the top of the fire-escape leading to the courtyard.

The cautious tread ceased, and was followed by a slight scraping and shuffling as of some one crawling. Victoria, with sudden inspiration, recalled a clothes-press in the wall near which she crouched. She felt for Sonia's hand in the darkness, secured the extinguished candle, cautiously opened the closet door, and entered, closing it behind her. Hurriedly she struck a light, then putting down the candle, as quickly slipped into the room once more.

"It's ready when we want it. I closed the door so he couldn't see the light or hear the match."

A soft pressure of Sonia's hand answered her.

The scuffling noise continued, so slight, that had they not been on their guard it must have passed unnoticed.

Another telegraphic squeeze passed between them as the dark bulk of a man's body and head loomed just above the iron ladder.

A pause, in which the girls held their breath and listened to the beating of their hearts. The man looked down, listened, swung his legs clear, and placed his feet on the fire-escape.

"Now!" cried Sonia, careless of noise, only anxious for swiftness. Opening the closet, she snatched up the light, and leaned out as she raised it high above her head. "Who's there?" Her voice rang sharp and loud.

The light fell full on the startled face of the man. A handsome face, whose yellow hair and contrasting black eyes were unmistakable.

"The Englishman!" whispered Victoria.

For an instant only, fear shone in his eyes — almost at once his face cleared to a charming smile.

"Don't be frightened," he said, softly, in very bad French, "it is nothing. My friend amused himself by locking me in my room for a joke, so I crawled out on the balcony and over the roofs to get even with him. Don't wake up the house. I'm awfully sorry I frightened you." He nodded pleasantly, and disappeared over the gutter's edge into the darkness below.

They heard him reach the courtyard; they heard his footsteps cross the court, and the lift of the latch as he let himself into the street by

the stable gate. The girls stared at each other in silence; then Sonia laughed.

"That's a joke on us, as you say, but it has frightened sleep from me for the rest of the night."

Victoria crossed to the table, took up one of her Russian friend's cigarettes, lighted it, and began to walk the floor.

Pausing abruptly before her companion, she inquired, sharply, "What did he want with a camera at night?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. Did he have one?"

"Yes, I saw it — a five by eight, I should say — in its black leather case, slung over his shoulder."

"Flashlight," suggested Sonia.

Victoria shook her head. "Aren't the odd numbers on this side of the hall?"

Sonia nodded in bewilderment.

"Then why did he say he climbed out on the balcony? The balcony is on the front, and the chambermaid said fifty-seven."

"She may have made a mistake."

"He's not an Englishman."

"He never said he was."

"I know; but he's dressing the part and has overdone it."

"Well?"

Victoria frowned and threw the cigarette out of the open window with unnecessary energy. "Sonia," she said, gravely, "you know I am going back to America in November. My passage is taken. The estate must be settled, I can't put it off. Now if I take this thing up it may mean endless trouble for me and legal complications. Sonia, you have to do it. Go down-stairs and find out if that man's story is true. Arouse somebody — everybody — but find out! Leave me out of it when you tell your story. Go on; there is no time to lose. I'll meet you down-stairs as if I had just come in. Go!"

Sonia sprang to her feet and disappeared down the hallway. Victoria followed a moment later, and joined her friend in the deserted office. With some difficulty they aroused a weary chambermaid.

"The Englishman! why, the young ladies were dreaming. The gentleman had gone away that

afternoon, just before dinner, saying he felt so badly he thought it best to go to his home."

The girls caught at each other with a common impulse. "The landlord — wake him up. Where is he?"

The chambermaid demurred. "It had been a busy day. They were all worn out. Was it permitted that people with nightmare should be waking honest folk out of their sleep —"

Victoria sprang at her and shook her by the shoulders. "Wake the landlord, do you hear? There is something wrong. It must be looked into."

Further parleying was made unnecessary by the appearance of the host, his suspenders hanging, his face swollen with drowsiness, and an expression anything but good-humored.

Sonia stated the case to him with hurried clearness, but his brain, being sleep-clouded and French, failed to take in its import.

"The Englishman in fifty-seven? He had paid his bill and gone. Was it permitted to wake people at midnight, name of a name, with such stories?"

Victoria's anger mounted with opposition. "Very well, then. Mademoiselle Palintzka had given him warning. If a crime had been committed and the culprit escaped, his was the responsibility. Mademoiselle had done all she could. Where was the commissaire of police? He should be notified, then mademoiselle would wash her hands of the whole affair."

At the mention of police the fat little man shook his lethargy from him and announced himself willing to investigate — but what, and where?

"Take the pass-keys and a light, and rouse every one in the front of the house," Sonia commanded. "Undoubtedly the man came from there. If the occupants were out of the place, look about and see if anything has been disturbed."

The *garçon-de-peine* appeared inopportunely, and the party was once more delayed while voluminous explanations were made to him.

"A half-hour at least since we got here, and nothing done," Victoria fretted, as at last the cortège, composed of the *garçon,* chambermaid, and landlord, armed with lights, pass-keys, and

the sabre which adorned the hall wall (a witness to the prowess of the proprietor in the Franco-Prussian War), got under way.

An examination of the lower floor was quickly made. On the first landing the rooms opened showed only the confusion of occupancy, and the contents were of such scanty nature as to offer no allurement to thieves. Few of the patrons were in, but to these the landlord poured forth apologies and explanations that rapidly brought the excited inmates in scanty apparel to swell the throng of investigators. Room after room offered no solution of the mystery. The second floor was reached. Here the procession paused, the host addressing himself uncertainly to Sonia.

"These were the apartments of the countess. Should they rouse her? The child was ill; there was also the maid. If any attack had been made on them they were sufficient in number to have made some outcry."

"Knock!" commanded Sonia.

A light tap on the door received no answer.

"They sleep," murmured the chambermaid,

with a scornful glance at the disturbers of her own rest.

"Louder!" said the Russian, shortly.

Still no answer.

"Madame la Comtesse!" called the *garçon-de-peine,* in discreet tones.

"Madame!" "Madame!" in various keys from the bystanders.

"Try the maid's door," the *bonne* suggested.

A deputation attacked the two doors further down the hall. No answer.

The party looked at each other.

"They certainly did not go out this evening," the *garçon* ventured. "The little girl was worse; they had dinner in their rooms. The child was in bed then, for I brought up the tray."

"The keys!" Victoria impatiently demanded. "You are losing time. Go in!"

The keys were produced and fitted to the lock, but not until the whole party had once more invoked the countess to answer. The door was opened slowly, and they entered, preceded by the landlord, vaguely muttering apologies.

The candles lit up a scene of the wildest con-

fusion. The drawers of the bureau were emptied upon the floor, a trunk stood open, from which the tilted trays had spilled their contents.

On the bed lay the countess, breathing heavily, a handkerchief over her head. The air was full of the smell of chloroform.

Sonia snatched the saturated linen from the woman's face, while Victoria hurried to the adjoining room. The same confusion reigned, but to a less degree. The thief had evidently known where to look for his booty.

The sick child was stretched stiffly on her side, a little ball of cotton at her nostrils. Across the foot of the bed the maid lay huddled, a gag in her mouth and a cloth securely tied above it. Evidently she had been overpowered before the anæsthetic had been applied.

Victoria snatched the cotton from the child's face and untied gag and bandages. The others crowded into the room, wet towels were brought, brandy applied, and windows opened wide. The atmosphere grew lighter. The countess stirred uneasily, and muttered.

"The doctor — send for him at once!" called

Victoria. "The child — quick, quick! don't stand there staring; don't you see that in her weak condition this may be fatal?"

The *garçon* hurriedly blundered off, and while willing hands ministered to the other victims, Victoria worked with agonized suspense over the limp little body. The heavy, gasping breath, the persistent coma, and the pinched, waxen face, were terrifying. Would the doctor never come? The maid was regaining consciousness, and from the other room the incoherent ramblings of the countess announced returning life. But the child made no sound, only that horrible, rasping breath that rattled in her throat.

Sonia came to the bedside and leaned over. "I wish I knew what to do," she murmured, "but we've done all we can. I have sent half a dozen of those jabbering idiots to fetch the police, so I suppose that some time in the next week they will start on that man's track."

"Oh, why — oh, why didn't we give the alarm! We had him — caught red-handed," Victoria moaned, as she bathed the unconscious face on the pillow. "The coolness of the villain," she

went on, "to invent that plausible excuse on the spur of the moment, for we must have frightened him, but not out of his wits, unfortunately."

"If he gets away I'll never forgive myself," Sonia hotly exclaimed.

"Then you never will, for he has everything in his favor. The pilgrimage — it's the easiest thing in the world to get away with a change of clothes, or even without, for that matter, in this press of the visitors. To-morrow's jam will be bigger than ever. There are fifty trains a day to and from Auray. Every road is choked with vehicles. He'd be a fool if he were caught, and we know he isn't that. Oh, why isn't the doctor here?"

"Madelaine, Madelaine!" the countess's voice screamed suddenly from the next room.

"Thank Heaven!" Victoria muttered, "the mother's all right. Perhaps she knows what is best to be done. Go and see. Bring her in here as soon as you dare — yet, no — the shock, right after the chloroform — I don't know what to say. Oh, where is the doctor?"

As if in answer to her prayer the sound of

opening doors and the stir of voices announced an arrival.

"Bring him here, Sonia," she begged. "The child is so weak, she needs him first."

The hotel-keeper, talking excitedly and followed by a commissaire and a gendarme, pressed into the room.

"This is the lady," indicating Sonia. "It was she who gave the alarm — "

"The doctor — didn't the doctor come?" interrupted Victoria, beside herself with disappointment.

"Not yet, mademoiselle, — presently," the gendarme answered, kindly, as he advanced to the bedside. His face grew graver as he watched the child's labored breathing. "We must get on the rascal's track at once. Did you see him, too? I understand you and the other lady room together."

Victoria prevaricated. "My friend recognized him when she saw him going down the fire-escape, but I can give you a good description of him, for I noticed him particularly during the day."

She rapidly portrayed the stranger, while her hearer jotted hastily in a note-book. In the win-

dow recess Sonia and the commissaire were engaged in animated conversation. Finally an exhaustive examination was made of the rooms, and the balcony by which the thief had entered and left. Nothing of any interest was found, but the maid, at last fully conscious, though laboring under great excitement, was able to give her testimony.

"The countess, worn out by her journey, had thrown herself, fully dressed, on her bed; the child was dozing. She, the witness, was sitting at the table with her back to the window, when she became conscious of a peculiar odor. She turned her head, and was at once caught from behind, and a gag forced between her teeth. She struggled, but was instantly overpowered. A cloth saturated with something was tied over her nose and mouth, and she lost consciousness."

"Had she seen her assailant?"

"Not fully. She had the impression of a very heavy, thick-set man. She thought he had a black beard. His clothes were dark, of that she was sure. As he had attacked her from behind, she had not been able to see him clearly; but of

his hands, which she had seen upon her shoulder and in fastening the gag, she had a definite recollection. They were coarse, hairy, and callous, the hands of a laborer, or, at least, one accustomed to manual work."

"Would she recognize them if she saw them again?"

"Certainly. She would never forget them —" and she became hysterical.

The countess remembered nothing, having passed from her natural sleep into the anæsthetic with only a slight struggle. But from her the motive of the crime was learned. She had brought a large sum of money and a quantity of jewels, which it had been her intention to present to the miraculous statue, if, by St. Anne's intercession, her child were cured. It was evident the thief had some knowledge of this treasure, the police argued, from the fact that none of the more accessible rooms in the house had been disturbed.

The countess gave her testimony through tears and entreaties, begging to be taken to her daughter. The arrival of the doctor interrupted the examination, and by his orders the unfortunate

mother was at once admitted to the child's bedside. The effects of the anæsthetic had passed, but no recognition lit the feverish eyes. Even the mother's voice and touch failed in their mission. When at last the long closed lips parted, shriek after shriek of blind terror woke the silence of the room. The doctor intervened, and drugged the child to unconsciousness again.

The room had been cleared of all strangers, except Sonia and Victoria, who remained in obedience to the supplication of the distracted woman. To Victoria's trembling inquiry the doctor shook his head.

"It's only a matter of time. Meningitis — she would have died anyway, but the fright and the chloroform — it will not be long."

"You must prepare her. She still hopes for a miracle," said Victoria, glancing at the kneeling figure of the black countess, who, prostrated at the foot of her daughter's bed, repeated prayer after prayer with agonized rapidity, clasping a worn rosary in her burning hands.

The candles, guttering in their holders, threw gigantic deformed shadows on the bare walls,

lighted up the tumbled bed, and drew sharp lines about the face of the dying child. Against the whiteness of sheets and pillows, the intensely black, shrunken figure of the bereaved woman seemed doubly sombre.

The doctor, with his squat figure, oddly assorted garments, and heavy, weary face, seemed a creature of Balzac's pen turned flesh and blood. Victoria gazed on the scene, her nerves tingling.

"I think," she whispered to him, "we, my friend and I, would better go. You can't let this blow strike her suddenly. I'm sure she'd go mad. If you should need us, send word; we'll come at once. But she would better be alone when she knows."

The physician nodded, and Victoria, beckoning to Sonia, slipped from the room into the hall. The whole house seemed dimly astir, but they saw no one as they made their way to their room. They did not undress, but lay down on their cots without speaking, and gazed on the sickly dawn that made a pale square of the window. An hour — two hours; the stir of waking things grew in the outer air; crowing of cocks, singing of

birds, vague hallos, the stamping and champing of stabled horses. The chimes rang four, then five, then six. The light of the newly risen sun was streaming pale yet brilliant on the old courtyard. Above the chimney-pots the white church spires gleamed against the hazy blue of the July morning. St. Anne's colossal statue, doubly gilded by its own precious leaf and the sun's contribution, gleamed and glittered. Through the opened window, a shaft of light boiled with tiny motes of gold.

Sonia turned for the thousandth time on her narrow bed.

"Are you asleep, Victoria?" she murmured.

Her friend shifted her position, threw a rounded arm over her tumbled hair, and sighed. "No, I'm not — are you?"

"No."

"I can't shake off the impression. That poor, poor woman!"

"Nor I," and Sonia half-raised herself. "Have you ever read Mæterlinck's play, 'The Intruder'? Well, I feel like the blind man, who

sees Death in the room. I have an actual horror of what seems a physical presence."

Victoria slipped her feet to the bare floor. "So have I. It's all a nightmare, and, Sonia, think what a contrast. Yesterday we were with the pilgrimage; the songs of praise, peace, good-will to men; faith, hope, charity, lights, music, mystery. Then, suddenly, it's sickness, crime, death! We came to a miracle play, and we have seen a tragedy!"

There was a silence, during which the square of sunshine crept softly down the room.

Sonia spoke. "To have robbed that woman, bringing her offerings to St. Anne, seems worse than robbing a church, doesn't it? How shall such a man be punished?"

"He won't be caught," Victoria answered, with conviction. "He has timed himself so well. He's a man of resource. If we hadn't seen him, he would have been perfectly safe. I bet he carried his stuff away in that leather camera-case. A foreigner with a camera, the most natural thing in the world, supposing he were seen before he could put his booty in a place of safety."

"Did you notice," said Sonia, dreamily, "that the maid's description of the hands didn't fit at all?"

Her friend nodded. "Yes, there may have been two men. One may have gone down the ladder when you came to the door for me; hardly, though! you would have heard distinctly if there had been more than one. Oh, well, I suppose the woman was too excited to see straight. The beard, of course, may have been false; but they won't find him, anyway."

"We ought to get up, I suppose. It's after eight. Are you going out to see the procession?" The Russian rose as she spoke, and proceeded to make as dainty a toilet as the place permitted.

Victoria followed her example languidly. "I suppose we might as well see all there is to be seen, but I have no heart for anything. Where are the girls? I should have thought they would have come for us long ago."

Sonia wrapped her hair in a shining coil. "No, I told them last night to get up and go out when they pleased, and leave us to sleep late. I

have no patience with travelling in a party where all feel they must hang together, even if their tastes are varied. If the girls went out early, they probably breakfasted in the tents, and don't know anything yet. I suppose *we* ought to eat," she added, after a moment.

"I'm not hungry," the answer came promptly.

Sonia leaned from the window and called to a passing servant, "Send two *déjeuners* up, please." Then, withdrawing her head, she smiled. "There are advantages in living over the stable; it ensures better service. We might have spent the whole morning ringing a bell, and been ignored, but bawling out of the window ensures attention."

Breakfast arrived with surprising promptness, the two girls having developed into important persons in the household. At any other time the curiosity and manœuvring of the servant would have been vastly amusing, now it was only an irritation. They answered awestruck questions with abrupt sharpness, and finally, unable to rid themselves of her queries, took refuge in silence.

"It's nearly time for the procession," Sonia observed, glancing at her watch, as the reluctant waitress disappeared; "we ought to go early if we want to see anything."

Absently adjusting the old campaign hat on her heavy hair, Victoria picked up her beloved camera. "I'm going to inquire how they are; I'll meet you in the office."

"Better finish your coffee," Sonia called after her. But the firm tread was already reverberating far down the bare hallway. The Russian pushed back her plate, and rose wearily. Truly life was a strange thing, so strange it dizzied one's brain with its questions of whence and whither. Perhaps even now that little child knew more than she, with all her varied and multiplied experiences. If there be any conscious knowledge on that mysterious other side! She drew her hat over her eyes and stepped out. The passage was cold and chill. She shivered slightly, and quickened her step. Out in the warmth and sunshine once more, her thoughts would be more cheerful, she reflected, as she made her way through the labyrinthine passages. She reached

the office, filled with chattering visitors by whom the robbery of the night was being discussed from every standpoint. The crowd made way for her, and she reached the doorway, where she leaned, waiting. The square was a seething mass of struggling humanity, swaying, vast, expectant. Men in white, bearing staves, were opening a passage before the great main entrance of the church. A full brass band was massing its forces, ready to herald the opening of the doors. Everywhere people were hurrying, running, calling, scrambling for better positions, or endeavoring to fight their way through the press. All was color, light, animation, expectation, and faith. A soft touch on her arm roused her. She looked up into Victoria's face, set hard and white as two heavy tears slipped slowly down her cheeks.

For a moment Victoria dared not trust her voice, but swallowed hard, looking straight ahead with fixed eyes.

"She's dead!" she said, simply. "I have seen her."

The band crashed forth a strain of triumph,

the cathedral doors swung wide, and amid the acclaiming of the crowd, surrounded by cardinals and bishops in scarlet and purple, the statue of many miracles, under its canopy of gold, swung glittering into the sunlight.

CHAPTER I.

THE room was hung in green of varying shades from palest malachite and réséda to deepest olive and emerald. This verdant retreat was the outcome of an essay that had fallen into Philippa Ford's hands at the time of the purchase and restoration of the old Verplank mansion in New York. One statement was to the effect that a love of green indicated strong individuality, and this appealed at once to the girl, whose keenest desire in life was to enforce her personality. Being blonde and lissome, the little reception-room framed what she was pleased to style her beauty with an added elegance and refinement, at the same time proving advantageously unbecoming to many of her callers. Just now she looked really charming as she leaned among the divan cushions, daintily gowned in a creation of cream lace and lavender crêpe that made her

seem some great pale-toned Parma violet in its setting of leaves.

"Do pour yourself some tea, dear girl," she murmured. "I'm too lazy to move, or I'd do it for you; besides, I am searching your long-lost countenance for the ravages of time, and I can't find one — not a ravage."

Victoria, sitting opposite, raised her gray eyes, in which a gleam of mischief sparkled. "Be sure you tell every one else that," she laughed.

Philippa squirmed. She had been mentally rehearsing a speech to her next interested caller. "The poor, dear Claudel girl is terribly haggard. I fear she has been trying to live on nothing over there. You know how Americans do." It was as if the "poor dear" had suddenly taken a peep at her brains. So, quickly assuming her sweetest tone of grieving affection, she ejaculated, "Oh, Vic! After all the years of our ideal friendship, how could you infer such a thing!"

"You are teased as easily as ever, I see," was all the answer she received, as the returned prodigal brushed cake crumbs from her well fitting

"'REALLY? I THOUGHT YOU WERE MERE ACQUAINTANCES.'"

tailor-made gown of the newest and most Parisian fashion.

"It's a sweet frock," Philippa commented, dreamily, "and your toque is very smart; that forward tilt suits you. The hats this year are simply invented to annoy me. Everything over the eyes, and my style is the off-the-face flaring thing. Have you seen many people since you arrived — our people, I mean?"

Her friend shook her head slowly. "No, not many. Bob and Howard Dame met me at the wharf, and last night Morton Conway came up. Dear old thing! I was jolly glad to see him."

She was staring at the Dutch silver tea-caddy, and did not see the quick flush that mounted to the white temples of her hostess.

"A charming fellow, and one to whom I have become greatly attached," the lady remarked in the somewhat stilted language she affected when she remembered to do so.

Victoria's frank eyes sought her face at once with eagerness.

"Really? I thought you were mere acquaintances. I forget how long I have been away,

and how many friendships have been made and unmade. No wonder you like him, though. Old Mort is the salt of the earth. A Don Quixote of most admirable intelligence. Indeed, I don't know another of whom I can speak in such unreserved praise, and seeing that I've known him all my life, — which amounts to a quarter of a century, — that is saying a great deal."

A green glint shot from Philippa's half-closed blue eyes — possibly the reflection of her surroundings, possibly the evidence of the whereabouts of a certain monster, as she recalled the common supposition of a former understanding between these two. Mentally, she was quickly calculating. Was Victoria in love with him? Had he ever had a tenderness for her? If either or both were the case, were her own fascinations superior? With marvellous accuracy she took count of stock, and concluded that Victoria would be a dangerous rival, but her belief in her own power made her confident of ultimate success, even if Morton were not already completely under her spell. However, with instinctive foresight she decided that she should precipitate matters

and bring about the proposal she had been holding off with consummate skill for the past month. Engagements entailed obligations, but Morton Conway was too good a catch to lose, and Philippa felt instinctively that the only danger that menaced her supremacy was personified before her.

All this passed in a brain flash, with the swiftness and certainty of a lightning-calculator, while she idly punched the pillows into more alluring curves, and her society self supplied a small-talk item.

"Tilly Genadet is to be married next week; are you going to her wedding?"

"I think so," Miss Claudel replied, as she rose to her feet, and with various facial contortions proceeded to readjust her veil.

"You're not leaving now, are you, dear?" and Philippa uncurled herself. "It's only five o'clock."

"Yes, I'm off. Ethel Tracy sent a note over this morning asking me to drop in to dinner — just the family, you know. Good-bye. Come over to the studio any time. I'm sharing Mrs. Testly

Durham's apartment, so you won't see my name on the board."

"Mrs. Testly Durham, the writer?" Philippa asked, eagerly.

"Yes. You seem surprised."

"Where did you meet her?"

"In Paris. We spent last winter in the same house."

"I'd like to know her."

"Well, call on me in the morning, and you'll find her at home. Good-bye again."

Philippa stepped to the window and watched her friend's odd but not inelegant figure as it descended the broad steps. "What should her relations with Victoria be?" she mused. Evidently she had new advantages and losses to adjust and balance. Victoria staying with Mrs. Testly Durham, the famous authoress, was a different thing from Victoria by herself in some studio. Then there was the Morton question. These suggestions hardly framed themselves as thoughts. She was unconscious of her own calculating meanness, tuft-hunting and snobbishness, and looked

upon herself as a veritable paragon of sincerity, loyalty, and broad-minded independence.

She turned with a little sigh back to the green depths of the divan and contemplated her reflection in the tilted mirror opposite. Yes, gossip had for years prophesied Victoria's engagement to Morton. There must be fire where smoke is seen. She must make sure of Morton at once. It was a nuisance, particularly just now, when her flirtation with Valdeck was so interesting; but she could keep the secret from every one but Victoria. Once in a position to make a confidante of her, she could be sure that her manor would remain unpoached upon.

Suddenly the question presented itself definitely, why was she so afraid of Victoria? She had no real reason: only merest gossip held that the lifelong affection that existed between the two had ever been, or ever would be, anything more than intellectual fraternity. The answer came back from her other self: "Because Victoria has never appreciated me at my true worth." In fact, she more than suspected that she was not looked up to and approved of in this new quarter.

If Victoria knew of the impending engagement, she was quite capable of making a desperate opposition. Philippa's heart hardened with a passing qualm of hate; she sat up suddenly and angrily. Almost she had admitted to herself that she was no fit mate for such a man, and that the effort that Victoria would undoubtedly make was founded on a quite accurate penetration of her real character. The momentary spasm of dislike that had gripped her returned a hundredfold stronger, steady and burning. She must lose the excitement of her present life, because her hand was forced; she must make sure of the brilliant future her marriage to Morton Conway would bring. The cards of that trick must be played and the mystery of her game dispelled; all because a long-absent member of her set had seen fit to return too soon.

A ring at the door-bell roused her. Hastily she smoothed her hair, and assumed a pose of absent-minded grace.

"Monsieur Valdeck," announced the butler, in a gentle tone of self-effacement.

The sea-green portières parted and the visitor

advanced, extending a well-gloved hand in elaborate greeting.

Philippa smiled with animation and held up her jewelled fingers to the lingering and meaning kiss of the new arrival. She colored a little, which lent an unexpected ingénue expression to the consummate artificiality of her pose. The trick of blushing, really due to the physical perfection and delicacy of her skin, passed with all save Victoria and a few rather amusedly cynical men for a sympathetically emotional expression of her innocent young soul.

A short, rather troubled silence ensued, which he broke abruptly, tossing a square box into her lap.

"See the wonders of love, my lady. I divined what robe you would wear, and I matched it on my way here."

She thanked him with her eyes, and poutingly fumbled with the string.

"Permit me," he murmured, and leaning over her till his auburn hair touched her cheek, deliberately cut the ribbon with his tiny gold-handled

penknife. He drew back slowly, as if her nearness held him like a magnet.

With a pretty gesture of admiration she drew from their wrappings a heavy bunch of Russian violets that instantly shed the perfume of their blossoms through the room.

"And now it grows and smells, I swear, not of itself, but thee," he quoted, smiling directly at her.

"That was when she sent the wreath back," Philippa laughed. "Shall I?"

"Do you want to break my heart?" he inquired, seriously.

She sniffed the bouquet, looking over the flowers with eyes now grown as violet as the blossoms. "I don't know. I think I might —"

"You ought to say, 'I know I have.'"

She shook her head. "No, not yet."

"You never believe," he sighed.

"No."

"Shall I never get my passport to your heart?"

She temporized. "Let me see, how should I make it out: 'Permit to travel in the heart of Philippa Ford, one Lucius Valdeck, native of Po-

land. Height, five feet, eleven inches. Black eyes and eyebrows, auburn hair. Weight, about — let's see — a hundred and seventy — "

"Much more — two hundred."

"Two hundred! Nonsense!"

"My heart is so heavy."

"Don't be a bore."

"Am I a bore?"

She nodded.

"What must I do to amuse?"

"Oh, tell me anything that's interesting — tell me about yourself."

He sobered. "I have already told you too much."

She leaned toward him sweetly. "You can trust me. I am a woman who can keep a secret."

"I believe it," he answered, in the same grave tone. "Otherwise I never would have breathed a word of my mission here."

"You know," she continued, laying her hand on his arm, "I am with you in all sympathy. I understand your noble wish to help your people. If you had been a Nihilist I never could have listened to you with such confidence. But your

plan to raise your fellow countrymen by education, even if it has to be given in secret, is wholly good and wise and noble. It is the first really sensible effort I have heard of."

Taking her hand, he kissed it with respectful adoration. "You give me courage, my lady."

Carried away by the situation, she went on with exaltation. "And if ever I can help you, let me know; you will always have a friend in me."

"What you have just promised I beg you to remember. Some day I may have to ask your favor," he said, slowly. Then, rising nervously, he peered into the empty hall.

"We are alone," she murmured, reassuringly; "you are quite safe."

He seated himself, relaxing to the luxurious fulness of the divan. "I forget I am in the land of the free, I have lived so long under the espionage of the police. And to think," he said, hotly, "that my only crime is the desire to help and educate my unfortunate people. The Russians, having taken away our lands and privileges, are now robbing us of our brains. Soon

there will be nothing left but our music — and that they cannot kill." He spoke with passion, that found a quick response in the dramatic instincts of his hearer.

"In these days of indifference your patriotism fires one," she cried. "You make me want to help. I am so eager to know more. Oh, I wish you would tell me about your work and those who help you. Your stories the other night kept me awake thinking of the nightly gatherings in secret and danger, when your devoted comrades teach their own prohibited tongue and keep alive the individuality of the race that aliens would crush out. I could never have believed in such tyranny if you yourself had not told me. It is so uncalled for, so cruel!"

He nodded solemnly. "It is past belief, and if you questioned a Russian he would emphatically deny it, either because he was ignorant of the truth, or because he dare not admit it. Only those who have lived as I have and seen what I have, can realize what the suppression of the Poles really means. The power we are contending with is so great, so secret, so terrible — why,

even here I am probably watched by their spies. I am known to be a contributor to the 'Educational Society' — indeed, that is why I came here. My usefulness at home was ruined by their having suspected my connection with the work. They cannot prevent my collecting funds in America, but they can and will try to prevent their ever reaching their destination."

"How do you manage?" Philippa begged.

He pulled himself up, as if his enthusiasm had already outrun his caution.

"That I cannot reveal, even to you. So don't ask me."

"Are there women connected with the work?" she inquired.

"Many; both teachers and outside workers. You see, the element we represent is as down on the bloody and incendiary doctrines of the Nihilists as it is on the oppression and cruelty of the Russians, consequently our membership enrolls many women, too wise and gentle to be drawn into anarchy and too devoted and clear-visioned to be entirely claimed by a life of frivolity. Oh, dear lady, I wish you could know some

of them. I am sure you would find them congenial — almost your equals in heart, mind, and charm."

His verbose sentences and elaborate compliments somehow became him, and the foreign accent that accompanied his words was a charm in itself. Philippa caught herself vaguely wishing that the handsome enthusiast were a matrimonial possibility. If only he had Morton's money and social position! Ah, well, it was all nonsense; foreigners, however fascinating, were never certainties.

He had risen restlessly and wandered to the window. He glanced out, but turned hastily.

"Mr. Conway is crossing the street. Coming here, I suppose," he said, bitterly. "Tell me, before we are interrupted, will you go with me on Monday to Madame Despard's studio, in the Carnegie — a little reunion of *grands esprits,* a glimpse of Bohemia?"

Her face lighted. "Yes, indeed, I shall love it, I know."

A ring at the door-bell announced the new arrival.

"You like him?" Valdeck asked, half in question, half in challenge.

"He is my dearest friend, you know. I have often thought of him as a sort of Don Quixote plus intelligence," Philippa plagiarized, soulfully.

He looked admiration at her. "I love the way you paint a character in a single sentence."

"Mr. Conway," announced the butler.

Valdeck collected his hat, stick, and gloves, and bowed politely, the two men exchanged perfunctory greetings, and the graceful foreigner took his leave. The newcomer watched him with undisguised annoyance.

"Philippa, do you like that man?"

She smiled gleefully. "That's just what he asked about you."

This did not seem to soothe Morton's feelings. "You are so much in his society. How did you meet him?"

"He came from New Orleans with a letter of introduction from one of my old schoolmates, Clarissa Pointue — you know the Pointues of Louisiana who own Angel Island?"

"Victoria says that letters of introduction and

confidences are alike — they had better not be given. By the way, she's back, you know."

"Have you seen her?" she asked, with assumed indifference, stretching her little trap.

"Of course. I went last night as soon as I knew where she was. She is one of my oldest and best friends, that *rara avis,* a woman-chum."

"She is a dear. She was here a few moments ago. If you had come a little earlier you would have been rewarded."

"By finding you two discussing the latest Parisian novelties, and having no satisfaction out of either of you."

"You see we are so intimate," she smiled. "She came over at once to see me; wasn't it dear of her?" She hoped Victoria would not by any chance mention the fact that Philippa, having seen her from the window, had sent the butler to stop her and insist on her dropping in for a moment. However, even if she did, it didn't amount to much. Philippa argued to herself that the more praise she lavished on her rival, the more would any derogatory remark of Victoria's concerning herself sound ungrateful and

mean in Morton's ears. She went on, enthusiastically, "Her home-coming is such a joy to me. She is one of the few really loyal, honest women, trustworthy and genuine, who would burn off their hands rather than hurt a friend!"

Morton nodded appreciation. "A woman in a thousand, and I am as glad to see your affection for her as I am sorry to see you wasting yourself on a cad like Valdeck."

Philippa saw her chance and took it.

"You have no real reason to dislike him, Morton, and you know it!"

"Oh, haven't I?"

"It's just because he is here so much, and you're — you're — it hurts me to have you think —" She broke off with a plaintive note.

He had never seen her with the bars of her coquetry down, and his love of her flamed up with the vision of his hope. He came across quickly, leaning with both hands on the tea-table. "I'm foolish because I'm jealous, because — I love you, Philippa."

She fumbled with the sugar-tongs, her fair head bent. Forcibly he raised her reluctant chin and

looked into her eyes. What he saw there stung through him like an electric shock.

"Oh, sweetheart! sweetheart!" he murmured, kissing her on her uplifted, unresisting mouth. "Why did you play with me so long?"

There was silence in the little boudoir. Then she disengaged herself from his enfolding arm and looked at him fondly. She pushed back his heavy brown hair, and fingered his cravat, as a child takes possession of a strange new toy.

"Morton," she said, in a very low voice, "I — I — don't want to announce it, dear. Aunt Lucy has her heart set on my marrying cousin Gabe, and she's been so good to me — I want to win her over to you without giving her annoyance. You understand, dear?"

"I hate the deceit of it," he answered, after a moment's uncomfortable silence. Her instant desire for concealment hurt him. Philippa looked pained. He felt like a blundering bore, and quickly added, "But it's just like you to feel that way about your aunt, and I love you for it."

She cuddled close to him, holding his hand in both hers and twisting his plain gold seal as if

it engrossed her whole attention. "You see I'm an orphan. I haven't much money, just barely enough to give me necessaries. Aunt Lucy has done everything for me, you can't guess half, and if I suddenly turn against her — for she'll think it that — it will break her heart. She will call me ungrateful, and, Morton, you know I'm anything but that — I — I couldn't bear it." A childish quiver of her lips spoke louder than words, for the actress in her was "feeling her part," and her emotion was quite genuine.

"Whatever you think best I'll abide by; I couldn't love you so if I didn't trust you absolutely," he answered, softly.

The rattle and chink of a stopping carriage broke in on them.

"There she is now!" Philippa exclaimed, in a sharp whisper, withdrawing from his embrace and quickly smoothing her hair.

A slam, a ring, the approach of the butler, a gust of cold air that swung the curtains, and Mrs. Pendington Ford entered. A swift glance of her sharp gray eyes took in her niece's indifference, Morton's confusion, the dents in the pillows, and

the disarray of the tea-things. Her eyes were pupilled by two points of interrogation as she glanced toward Philippa, but she greeted the caller with formal grace. There was something of the drum-major about the lady. One expected to see her swing her gold-knobbed parasol, toss it above her voluminous head-dress to catch it again and spin it solemnly on the tip of her too tightly gloved fingers. She was tall, stout, florid. If she had been born a century earlier she would have been a loud-mouthed, gambling duchess; now she suggested only the drum-major.

Seating herself upon the uttermost edge of a chair, the better to maintain the upright dignity of her carriage, she smiled slowly and wisely.

"My dear, a fresh cup, please. I am faint, positively. I drove round the Park and stopped at the Tredways. They must get their tea from a bargain-counter. I really could not touch it."

Philippa, with commendable *sang-froid,* concocted a well-rummed beverage.

"Victoria Claudel has just been here," she announced, gaily.

"Indeed!" Mrs. Pendington Ford's voice was not very cordial. "Where is she stopping?"

"She is sharing Mrs. Testly Durham's suite at the Carnegie."

"The writer?"

"Yes, Aunt Lucy. They are very intimate friends."

Victoria's stock went up six points, and the drum-major sipped her tea. "We must have them to dinner sometime, Philippa. Miss Claudel is an old friend of yours, is she not, Mr. Conway?"

"Since we were children," Morton replied, glad to have a direct question to answer, and feeling unable to cope with general conversation.

"I remember her mother," Mrs. Ford went on, "Miss Graves, of Philadelphia, a delightful girl. Her marriage to Mr. Claudel was considered quite a brilliant one, but unluckily, he was more of a scholar than a man of business — lost money constantly. It was really fortunate he died early, or the family would have been quite impoverished. As it was, the children and Victoria will only have barely enough to live on."

"The estate is to be settled now, I think," said Philippa. "Bob is of age, if I'm not mistaken."

"She came home on that account," Morton put in.

Mrs. Ford was benign as she rose to her feet. "Well, Philippa, dear, don't forget you must dress for the Bentleys' dinner. You must excuse my rudeness, Mr. Conway, but she is such a scatterbrained girl that if she is having an interesting conversation she forgets her engagements, and is known as the late Miss Ford."

Morton blushed and glanced at his watch. "I am the one to beg indulgence; it's shockingly late, — I — "

Mrs. Ford smiled almost affectionately. "My dear man, don't apologize for paying us such a nice indirect compliment. Philippa, dear, you must invite Mr. Conway when we ask Victoria and Mrs. Testly Durham to dinner. You'll be sure to come, won't you?"

Morton muttered his thanks and took his leave.

As the street door closed the aunt and niece faced each other.

"It's done, then. My congratulations, dear." Approval beamed from the majestic presence.

Philippa punched a pillow and shrugged her shoulders.

"Yes."

"Well, it was about time you came to your senses and brought things to a crisis. I began to despair of you," Mrs. Ford coolly commented.

"I can take care of myself."

"No, my love, you can't, as I've noticed to my great regret. However, I shall announce the engagement with great pleasure."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" Philippa's face grew crimson with annoyance.

"What are you up to now?" her aunt inquired, with obvious cynicism.

"Nothing. But I don't want it known yet; I've good reasons."

Mrs. Ford went to the core of the matter with brutal directness. "You have your good-for-nothing flirtation with that Valdeck on foot, that's what you have. Now, mark my words, you'll get into trouble; if you do, don't come to me. You are a fool if you take chances with Morton

Conway. My advice is, announce your engagement at once, marry soon."

"Time enough to settle down," said Philippa, irritably.

"My dear," her aunt replied, "please remember that people usually have to settle up before they can settle down."

"Moralize all you please, aunty, dear," and Philippa took another tack, "but please don't go announcing till I tell you. I give you my word I'll not lose him."

Mrs. Ford spread her sails and swept up the stairs. "Very well," she said, over her shoulder; "but don't get too much mixed up with Valdeck."

"What have you against him? I thought you prided yourself on the charity of your judgment," sneered Philippa, as she followed in her aunt's rustling wake.

Mrs. Pendington Ford sighed. "I am charitable in my judgments, because one must have men for afternoon teas, but I wouldn't risk my queen to save a crook — I mean a rook — to play with. What will you wear to-night?"

Philippa considered. Valdeck would be asked,

and he liked odd things. "The green spangled one," she answered.

"Oh, is he to be there?" the drum-major inquired, negligently, as she closed her bedroom door.

Philippa stamped her foot with vexation and fairly fled up-stairs to her own sanctuary. There she flung, or more properly speaking, disposed herself upon her lounge, and rapidly reviewed the past crowded hours. She was engaged — that she knew; she was in love — she imagined. How dreadfully unfortunate that the two statements were not the natural sequence of each other. Pity for herself swept over her. Alas, for money conditions! cruel, worldly considerations! but she must be strong, she must be wise, and keep this foolish passion in its place. She pictured herself amid the luxurious surroundings her future fortune would assure her, and promptly forgot her *peine de cœur* in the pleasant occupation. It was recalled, however, by the entry of her maid bearing a square envelope, directed in Valdeck's familiar hand, and a small box tied with a pink ribbon.

"Madame says," timidly suggested the servant, "that mademoiselle is not to waste time in dressing. What gown, mademoiselle?"

"Green spangles," Philippa answered, absently, as she ripped open the note.

"Most sweet lady," it began, "pardon my presumption, but your kindness to-day touched me greatly. Your offer to help, coming as it did, when I was racked by fears and perhaps needless nervousness, has been as medicine to me. You who are so kind add one more obligation to the many you have heaped on me, by accepting the little gift I send herewith. The pin was my mother's and my mother's mother's for generations. So it is rather the sentiment attached to it that makes it worthy of you than its paltry value. Pray accept this little keepsake in the spirit of the sender.

"LUCIUS VALDECK."

As she read, that which stood with Philippa in the place of conscience smote her that she had forgotten her devoted knight in the contemplation

of her mundane future. To make amends, and since the dramatic qualities of the situation seemed to require it, she kissed the note, carefully avoiding the observation of the maid. Next with swift fingers she unfastened the packet. A little hot wave of joy broke over her as its contents lay revealed. An ancient brooch of rose diamonds set about a splendid emerald, matchless in color, though flawed. Wound through the design were two tiny gold dolphins, from whose mouths swinging pendants hung. A gem of workmanship, beautiful, priceless. Philippa gazed at it in delight, then, fearing her aunt's detective eye and ironic laugh, hastily hid the jewel in her bosom.

"PHILIPPA GAZED AT IT IN DELIGHT, THEN . . . HASTILY HID THE JEWEL IN HER BOSOM."

CHAPTER II.

"MONDAY," said Victoria, as she tore the Sunday slip from the calendar. "Let's see what it says. 'Lives of great men all remind us' — oh, dear, why will they supply us with such antique quotations?"

"I shall compose a cynic's calendar," said Mrs. Durham, from her desk. "A little thing with quotations from well-known philosophers, notably Voltaire and Carlyle."

"Dyspeptic's calendar would be better," volunteered Miss Claudel. "I'll contribute a proverb. 'It's a strong head that hath no turning.'"

"Oh," said Mrs. Durham, presently, "wouldn't you like to go over to Madame Despard's studio this afternoon? She has one of her 'at homes.' They are very curious and wholly instructive.

It is the cream of what society thinks is Bohemia, an exhibition of genuine Angoras. No man admitted to the inner circle unless his ambrosial locks sweep his collar — the collar generally needs it badly. I go constantly. It's a morbid craving, but I can't control it."

Victoria discovered a box of chocolates and fell on them voraciously. "My dear, I've seen such a lot of foolishness in the Paris studios that I must beg to be excused."

Mrs. Durham left her desk and came across to the seductive sweets. "No, you never saw anything like this," she insisted, "it has to be seen to be believed. It is a collection of creatures impossible in any other society but the great, gullible American *beau monde*. Nowhere else would such a delightful aggregation of sideshow freaks be taken seriously. I love them, I am filled with a fiendish glee whenever I go. It's like living in a farce comedy. You'd better come."

"All right," Victoria assented. "How does one dress?"

"Soulfully. Soul is the key-note of these

meetings. If you have anything in the way of a 'poem,' wear it. The Despard always wears a 'poem.' The last was a sonnet in solferino."

"I have a ballad in blue, I think, but it's in the bottom of my trunk," Victoria suggested. "I might wear a very short golf skirt, and go as a quatrain; I have been told my feet were correct."

"I," said Mrs. Durham, "will disport my usual 'lines' in a lavender with lace refrain. Mr. Theodore Trent Gore told me last time it reminded him of Beethoven's second symphony."

"Who's the gentleman?"

"What! you don't know the American Mallarmé? the Maeterlinckean symbolist of the New World?"

"Alas! no!"

"Nor Stephen McKenzie, who publishes *The Voice,* nor Miss Red, who does terpsichorean-turns-for-the-first-families-only? Oh, my dear, my dear! put on the ballad in blue, and come at once! You can't be too early or stay too late in your pitiable state of ignorance!"

Victoria obediently disappeared into the depths

of a voluminous trunk. For a moment the air was thick with flying vesture as she dug diligently — much as a fox-terrier widens a woodchuck hole. She emerged with a gown, and held it up for inspection.

Mrs. Durham nodded. "Very good. Hurry up now and get beautiful."

"You're very slangy for a literary light," her friend observed, as she began a leisurely unhooking.

A half-hour skilfully employed produced two very striking *chefs d'œuvres,* — Mrs. Durham, pretty, slender, and blonde; Victoria, handsome, wholesome, and richly brunette. They stepped into the empty resonant corridor, and, after threading many devious mazes, emerged into a vestibule from which three doors opened. They were all ajar, and from beyond emanated a buzz of conversation and a chink of glasses. Mrs. Durham took the lead, and, pushing aside the bamboo curtains, they entered a large room, half drawing-room, half studio. The upper half, lighted by an immense glass window, covering nearly the whole wall space, was more or less

furnished by easels, paint-brushes in ginger jars, bespattered palettes, and scraps of drapery. The lower half of the apartment offered a not ill-disposed assortment of the conventional bibelots of the cultivated collector. A colored plaster cast of the "Unknown Lady," and a reproduction of the "Tête de Cire" attributed to Raphael, stood on Florentine brackets above the heavy Empire writing-desk of vast proportions. Everywhere hung sketches, mostly unframed and bearing well-known signatures. A collection of Japanese prints in gray "passepartouts" came next to the door opening into the adjoining room, and above the grand piano hung a dozen or more framed photographs of celebrities, all signed and bearing more or less complimentary remarks concerning their dear and admired Madame Despard. To any one unaquainted with the habits of celebrities, this array was vastly impressive, but it is such an easy way to repay attentions, that — well, why rob Madame Despard of her greatest glory?

The details of the place only impressed Victoria when she had leisure to observe, as every-

thing to a height of six feet was obscured by the weaving, elbowing, chattering crowd that filled the room, a kaleidoscope of all feminine textures and hues, plentifully besprinkled with the sober colors of the male visitors, for the hostess prided herself that men were never lacking for her "at homes." Mrs. Durham darted between the entering groups like a busy shuttle in the animated web, and seized on the attention of a weary-eyed woman draped in a Spanish shawl.

"Dear madame," she cried, "as wonderful as ever — but you are all so wonderful. I have brought my very dear friend, Miss Claudel. She is of the elect."

The hostess enveloped the newcomer in an intent, thoughtful gaze. "Such words of praise from you, dear Muse, more than ensure her sisterhood among us. Miss Claudel, we are a little circle of souls tightly drawn to one another by the bonds of the mind and heart. Our welcome is sincere. Carl!" she called, dolorously. A long-haired gentleman in 1830 costume rose from his reclining position over the grand piano, and advanced with Delsartean grace. "Carl, our dear

Muse has brought one of the elect, Miss Claudel. Find her a comfortable corner and supply her needs."

Mrs. Durham instantly fell into the hands of a tall blond soul, with wistful eyes, and force was for Victoria, feeling much confused, to follow the lead of the 1830 apparition. Escorted to a cushioned divan under an Oriental canopy, she settled herself and gazed about her with such evident interest, that her companion divined her curiosity.

"Do you see the two men by the window — the one with the Jove-like head, that's Hartly, the poet, who wrote the 'Songs of Satan;' a charming fellow. The man he's talking to is a fellow named Brown. Does skits and foolish things for the 'Lambs' Club.' I never could understand why he is tolerated here. I have a feeling whenever I see him that he does not appreciate the spirit of our gatherings. There is an ironic levity about him that hurts me. But I must not malign him to you, as he is a great friend of our dear Muse. They always sit to-

gether at these gatherings and they seem to enjoy each other vastly."

Victoria longed secretly for the foolish Brown, whom she began to suspect of a sense of humor, but dared not voice her desire.

"The lady with the marabouts is the Baroness Corolla," her Virgil continued, "formerly 'Mlle. Zulie,' the *chanteuse eccentrique*. She wasn't much of a *chanteuse*, I hear, but she excelled in the *eccentrique*. The thick-set man? Oh, yes, that's Melville, the music critic. His divorce has just been granted; we all expect he will marry the lady over there in black with the white roses. She's Marion Delplain, the singer, and quite his affinity. That's his wife over there in sables and blue velvet — oh, dear, yes, they are great friends. He's a political economist. The slim girl? That is Miss Red, my sister."

"The lady who dances so wonderfully?" asked Victoria. "I have heard of her."

"Indeed? She will be glad. I recite for her while she poses — little things of my own, suggested by the music."

"Really? How I should love to be present sometime."

"Perhaps," and he smiled kindly, "we may give some little trifle this afternoon — we are all under tribute here. In madame's salon one can not do less than give freely of one's gifts. These are gatherings of the inner circle, few are admitted who are not vouched for, even as your friend presented you."

"And yet," said Victoria, "I see Miss Trevor and Miss Berkley — are they of the circle?"

"Patrons of ours," Mr. Red loftily allowed. "Horace must invite Mæcenas. My sister dances at their houses next week."

"And the stout man in the corner?"

"Once again Mæcenas; he is Mr. Gustell, the publisher. He has brought out a number of us in book form, both by picture and print. S—h, we must not speak while Herr Balder plays; nothing so annoys the sensitives."

Silence fell upon the assembly as a stout little man, with speaking black eyes, seated himself at the piano, swept the audience with a dreamy glance, and fixed his gaze suddenly on Victoria.

He struck a few preliminary chords, got up, whirled the piano-stool, and began to play Viennese waltzes of languorous swing.

Victoria, thus selected as object of the serenade, became embarrassed and uncomfortable, but Mr. Red was delighted that his companion should be thus singled out. In defiance of the feelings of the "sensitives," he whispered:

"It's an open secret that Herr Balder always dedicates his work to the most beautiful woman present. You should feel flattered."

It was on Victoria's tongue to call the custom a piece of impertinence, but she reflected upon the Romans and their habits and the duties of visitors at that capital. The humor of it struck her, and despite her efforts, she smiled, a lapse that had the effect of doubling the attentions of the genius, who fairly made love to his keyboard proxy.

At the conclusion of the performance there was no applause, "Just as there should be no prizes in such a gathering," Mr. Red explained; but from various corners affected souls rushed forward to present their appreciations.

The little pianist bowed stiffly, with a gentle,

fatuous smile on his round face, and turning to Madame Despard, evidently asked for an introduction to Victoria. They both turned toward her and advanced hand in hand. The hostess, with a graceful drape of her shawl, giving herself the lines of an enlarged tanagra, stood before the divan.

"Miss Claudel, our dear, wonderful Herr Balder wishes to meet you. Let me introduce two affinities. Carl," she continued, dreamily, "your sweet sister Terpsichore has consented to do 'Narcissus' for us. She has just finished changing her costume. Your mother will play, and of course you will improvise, so I must tear you from the society of our new sister."

He leaned over her. "Herr Balder shall not alone have the honor of offering you his muse; *I* will improvise to you!"

Victoria controlled a laugh and looked as soulful as the circumstances seemed to require.

The poet turned to follow his hostess, and she encountered a valentine in each of Herr Balder's round eyes. The suppressed laugh broke out.

She blushed at her rudeness, and endeavored to cover it.

"I feel as happy as a girl at her first ball," she gurgled.

"And I am as happy as a man in love," he replied, voicing the valentine.

"Why, I thought a man in love was always a most unhappy creature?"

"No, not so," he smiled.

Anxious to break the rather awkward thread of the conversation, she turned toward the room. "We must be quiet. Mr. Red is going to begin."

The piano now attacked by a stout lady, whose gown resembled a purple toga, gave forth in rather mechanical time, the familiar strains from the "Water Nymph Suite." The 1830 poet gloomed and glowered, turning his inspired orbs upon the conscious Victoria.

"Oh, love, it is thy beautiful face I see!"

Mr. Red exclaimed, in liquid tones, half-recitation, half-song.

The Japanese curtain parted, the slim girl in Greek attire reaching to the knee, like the Spartan

girl's running costume made famous by the statue, gambolled awkwardly in on the tips of her pink satin ballet slippers.

"Oh, gaze on me! oh, gaze on me!"

continued the improvisator. The gleesome sister executed a colt-like gyration and stood "at pose."

A discreet murmur greeted the picture. Around the imaginary pool, the more than imaginary Narcissus cavorted, smiling admiringly at the polished floor from which the rugs had been rolled back. The beat of the piano and the cadences of the poet dwindled in Victoria's ears as the absurdity of the dance took hold upon her. The time changed. Mr. Red changed the metre of his poem and announced "The Anger of the Gods." The dancer, who had certainly earned it, seemed, to do her justice, to be in trouble. "Narcissus transformed to a flower," melodiously warbled the poet, selecting another attitude, the music returning to its opening movement. Narcissus stood poised on one foot, seemingly unable to place the other.

"A flower upon its stem," observed Herr Balder.

"A stork on one leg," Victoria retorted, in a whisper.

He looked pained. "Don't you admire it?"

"The music, yes."

"No, the idealization."

"Meaning the acrobatics? I can't say I do."

He sighed. "It is not her best, perhaps. You should see her do the Rubáiyát!"

Victoria flamed. "The Rubáiyát! She dares!"

"A genius always dares."

"Good heavens!" The gray eyes filled with resentment. "Anything but that — it's sacrilege!"

The music ceased. A murmur of delight, a sudden chorus of adulation met the "artists."

"They actually applaud that!" Victoria exclaimed, in amaze.

"Applaud and pay for the privilege elsewhere. She gets one hundred and fifty dollars and more for a dance."

Victoria rubbed her eyes. "I have been away for some time, I know, and there is nonsense enough in Europe over such things, but — never, never would have believed it possible here."

"It is only one phase of our new artistic development," said Herr Balder, encouragingly. "You will hear and see many things in this salon that will doubtless delight you. Miss Fenodo will read from her poems. I fancy she is more in your line."

In the buzz of renewed conversation and general shifting of partners, Mrs. Durham had made her escape and was coming toward them.

"Isn't she handsome!" exclaimed Herr Balder, "dear Muse!"

The Muse certainly was handsome. Her girlish, slender fairness did not prevent her face from showing the vigorous intellect behind it, nor the cynical humor of her eyes, which were the only old thing about her. She subsided on the divan, and gazed at her friend with mirthful inquiry.

"Having a good time?"

Victoria nodded. "Yes, but I'm a little confused. You know Herr Balder?"

"Oh, dear, yes; every one in the inner circle knows his geniusship."

The musician beamed and bowed. "Miss

Claudel does not seem to admire Miss Red's interpretations as we do," he murmured.

"Really!" and Mrs. Durham looked with such innocent reproof at her unenthusiastic friend that Victoria all but lost her self-control.

"Ah!" she went on, "she hasn't seen Madame Despard faint down-stairs backwards. That is a dream of grace; it always reminds me of Alice, who studied 'drawling and stretching and fainting in coils.'"

"I don't believe I know the lady," Herr Balder remarked.

"Oh, she's Alice Carroll, a friend of our youth and the delight of our old age. There's quite a crush to-day. I see Miss Lewis, Miss Manæ, and Mrs. Bonson. When were they admitted? or are they just Mæcenases?"

"Is that one of the passwords of the inner circle?" Victoria inquired; "and have you made a verb — I Mæcenas, thou Mæcenasest, and he Mæcenases?"

Mrs. Durham called Victoria's attention to a couple near them. "There is Mr. Valdeck with a very smart-looking woman. Probably he's

showing her Bohemia, as one takes a party through the slums."

"Why, it's Philippa Ford," Victoria exclaimed. "Who did you say the man was?"

"Lucius Valdeck, an Austrian or a Pole or something, travelling for pleasure. He hasn't been here long; in fact, when I met him he was just up from New Orleans, and that wasn't more than — let's see — three months ago. He has made his way with wonderful rapidity; one meets him everywhere, and he hasn't a title, either."

Victoria drew her heavy brows together in a frown. "I've seen him before; I'm sure I have, but I can't place him."

"Oh, probably; he's the sort of a person one would be sure to meet with in society, either proper or improper."

"I'll ask Philippa about him; he's somebody, or she wouldn't bother with him. By the way, I promised her she should meet you. She admires your work immensely. I'll call her over."

Philippa, having been introduced to the presiding soul, was slowly progressing through the crowd, while Valdeck presented various notables.

He was devoted, almost tender, and did not seem in the least desirous of masking his infatuation for his companion. She was looking her best — and knew it. Her blonde hair shone softly under a velvet hat with curling plume. Her color was high, her eyes brilliant, she exhaled a perfume of violets and elegant femininity. In her triumphal progress she approached Victoria, who nodded pleasantly. She at once disengaged herself from the tentacles of the editor of *The Voice,* and having recognized Mrs. Durham, precipitated herself upon Victoria — introductions followed, and the authoress found herself metaphorically clasped to the breast of her "constant reader."

Meanwhile, Valdeck having become separated from Philippa in the latter's dash for the divan, was looking about eagerly in search of her. The crowd was so great that the low seat in the corner was almost constantly obscured from his view, and it is doubtful whether he would have discovered where she was, had he not become conscious of being stared at by some one. He shifted uneasily with the uncanny sensation, and looking in the direction of the annoyance, he caught sight

"SUDDENLY HIS EYES MET VICTORIA'S."

of his lady, deep in animated conversation with a woman in lavender. But she was not looking at him, it was not she that called his attention. Suddenly his eyes met Victoria's as she stared in an evident effort to place him. A vision, clear and sharp, flashed before his eyes — a vision of that same face, and another as striking, framed in the darkness of a dormer-window and illuminated by a candle, suddenly thrust aloft. His heart stopped beating.

"Auray!" He almost spoke the word. Outwardly his calm did not desert him. Changing his direction, as if he had perceived some one requiring his attention, he disappeared into the adjoining room, where the punch-bowl, ringed with glasses, called the convivially inclined. He poured himself a glass, noticing as he did so a slight tremor in his hand. With wonderful nerve he steadied himself and drank. "This has got to be planned for," he thought. "I must keep out of sight, if possible; if not, it will have to be brazened out. Oh, the damnable luck of it!"

A superstitious fear tightened about his heart. He had always been so amazingly fortunate.

Was a turn in that fabled wheel to transform his car of triumph into the Juggernaut that should crush him? He plucked out the fear resolutely. Very probably she had not recognized him. However, she evidently felt that she had seen him before. From that to recognition was only a step, one that might or might not be taken, but one to be prepared for. He glanced rapidly over his present position. As far as he could judge it was secure; his letters of introduction had been excellent. The warm-hearted Southerners to whom he had devoted himself on his ocean trip had more than rewarded his attentions. Nothing could be proved for months, and all he wanted was another week or two of his present freedom.

He stopped short. The pin! the jewel he had foolishly given Philippa the more securely to bind her to his interests! It was a part of that very Auray haul! Again a stab of foreboding smote him, and he cursed himself.

"That's what I get for letting my foolish antiquarian respect get the better of my judgment," he thought. "It should have been broken up along with the modern pieces; though it was

hardly worth five hundred francs aside from its artistic value. Rose diamonds have no market, and the emerald, good color, was terribly flawed. There's only one chance in a million that that girl may have seen it on the old lady; another chance in a thousand that she would recall it sufficiently to identify it. But — I must get the thing from Philippa at any cost," he said, aloud. "She's wearing it!" flashed over him. He drank another glass of punch and sat down. "She has her sable cape on," he argued; "it's becoming; she won't take it off unless the place gets insupportably hot. Perhaps — But allowing she does show it — what then?" He clenched his hand. "Vanity, pride — those are her weaknesses. I must compromise her so completely that to save herself she will have to work with me. She's a fool, and she loves the venturesome, provided she thinks she won't be caught. She believes she can manage men, in any and all situations — we'll see. She'll go to dinner if she can give her aunt a good excuse. She must be dining somewhere else. A girl of that kind always has a friend to use as a blind, either because she's good-

natured, or because she wants a return in kind. How am I to get hold of her without running up against the other girl?" Like Napoleon, he possessed the faculty of concentrating his thoughts in the most distracting environments. With the whole energy of his physical and mental strength he set himself to frame his plans amid the hubbub of the afternoon tea. The better to excuse his absorption he opened his note-book and became apparently engrossed in jotting down something from time to time — a trick not infrequent in this circle of idea-mongers.

Meanwhile Philippa was deploying her forces to surround and capture Mrs. Testly Durham for her purposed dinner.

"When could she and dearest Victoria come? It must be soon. What, all the week engaged? They must set their own date, then — such busy people! Oh, yes, she knew they must be fairly importuned with invitations — but this was different; friends from childhood. So glad Victoria had at last come home."

"Dear Victoria," who fully appreciated the

situation, smiled sweetly at Mrs. Durham's struggles in the well-known net.

"Let us say next Thursday, then," she finally put in, with decision.

Mrs. Durham's mouth opened to remind Victoria of the Gordon's poster-party, but a dig from a neatly shod foot turned the reminder to a cordial acceptance.

Victoria broached her puzzle. "Who is the man you came in with, Philippa? I've seen him somewhere, or else he looks like some one I have seen, but I can't place him, and my brain is softening from the strain."

Philippa's face brightened, delighted to blow the trumpet of her protégé's prowess. "Mr. Valdeck. Such a dear. He's quite after your own heart, so charming, so cultivated, so well-bred. He belongs to a well-known Polish family, is wealthy. He is travelling for pleasure under an incognito, of course, to avoid newspaper reporters and that sort of thing. Oh, he is a very serious, retiring sort of fellow in spite of his social position. The Pointue girls gave him letters of introduction — one to me, of course —

Consuelo Pointue and I are close friends, you know. He has been a great success. All of our set have received him. You must meet him. Where is he, I wonder? I thought he would follow me over here. Madame Despard must have seized on him to entertain some wallflower — he is so good-natured. Between ourselves," she added, in her desire to aggrandize her adorer, "he has an important mission over here; not officially, you know, and you mustn't refer to it. His telling me was quite confidential."

Mrs. Durham smiled. "You may rest assured that Miss Claudel and I will keep the secret as you would yourself."

"Oh, I'm sure of it," Philippa went on, unconscious of the speaker's mild irony, "I am an excellent judge of people. I can count my mistakes on my fingers."

"But all this," Victoria objected, ruefully, "doesn't help me in the least. I cannot place the man, and I feel memory nagging at consciousness, as if it were connected with something important. Don't you hate that sensation?"

Mrs. Durham nodded assent.

A strident "S—h—sh" from the hostess silenced the chatter in the rooms. "Miss Fenodo will read a few selections from her forthcoming book of poems," she announced.

A tall, angular woman, clad in a plain serge walking-suit, rose to her feet and nodded awkwardly at the gathering. She seemed ill at ease, and fumbled nervously with several typewritten papers.

"'The Enchanted Mesa,'" she read, in an uncertain voice.

Philippa turned a vague eye on Victoria. "What's a 'Mesa'?"

"'The Enchanted Mesa,'" explained Mrs. Durham, "is the name of those curious mountains in Arizona or New Mexico — it's —"

But the lank poetess had struck her gait, as one sometimes sees a lean, loose-built horse develope exceeding speed. Hers was real poetry, clear, terse, forceful, and colored. Amid the trumpery nonsense of the mock Bohemian salon, it was as much out of place as a jewel in an ash-heap. Every line minted clear and gleaming, the rare golden coin of language.

An astonished silence followed the reading, but Victoria startled the audience with a vehement and reverberating "Bravo!" The applause broke out in a decorous wave, but it was plain to be seen that the shot had passed far over the heads of most of the listeners, notably the editor of *The Voice,* who shrugged his shoulders, as if he had refused that sort of thing by the ton.

The eyes of the reader naturally turned to the group on the divan, where Victoria, overcome by the sudden outburst of her own voice, was blushing furiously.

"'A Legend of Monterey.'" She read the verses directly to her partisan with a half-apologetic look, as if explaining the need of a mental support. This time the enthusiasm was more roused, and Victoria's sincere delight found fuller backing.

"I'm going to speak to her," she announced, as the woman crumpled her papers and moved stiffly aside.

"So am I," Mrs. Durham exclaimed. "She's real."

Philippa, who had a witty epigram all prepared,

with which to crush the poetess, was annoyed at the enthusiasm of her companions, but as Mrs. Durham was a celebrity, and Victoria, as she had good cause to know, was an unerring picker of literary winners, she reluctantly pocketed the epigram, for use at some other time, and announced herself on fire to pay tribute to "that really remarkable talent."

The three ladies had risen, when a servant approached Philippa with a folded card.

"Wait for me one moment," she begged, "till I see what this is."

Two lines in pencil in Valdeck's hand. "Russian consul just come; must slip off. Join me in vestibule, please — undiscovered."

With a delighted sense of her importance and the romance of the situation, Philippa blushed with eagerness and excitement. "I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed, hurriedly; "I must go at once. Do remember Thursday next; I'm coming to call before, of course. Good-bye, Mrs. Durham, I'm so glad to have met you; good-bye. Oh, Victoria, will you fasten this hook for me, like a dear?" She leaned forward, holding out the

soft fur edges of her cape collar, revealing as she did so the elaborate velvet appliqué of her waist and the exquisite beauty of an ancient pin that nestled at her throat.

Victoria's eyes rested on it for one breathless second, then her voice spoke strange and sharp as she fairly jerked out the question: "Where did you get that?"

"Goodness!" thought Philippa, quickly, "I can't tell her I accepted such a valuable present from Valdeck — can't even excuse it on old friendship. I'm engaged to Morton, I forgot to tell her — but now isn't the time." An imperceptible pause covered this calculating. "Why, Victoria," she said, gently, "what makes you so savage? It's an old thing of mother's. I found it not long ago among some letters and keepsakes of hers. Pretty, isn't it?"

Philippa's voice was full of sentiment and sorrow. To hear her one felt instinctively the desire to protect this motherless girl, and to pass quickly from a subject that might cause sad recollections. Victoria controlled the strong emotion that shook her.

"Oh," she said, awkwardly, "it's very handsome and most unusual."

"I must go," Philippa mourned, and with an affectionate backward glance, moved toward her hostess. "Such a charming time, my dear Mrs. Despard. You must come to my Thursdays. I hear the Russian consul is here; do point him out to me."

"Is he?" queried madame, languidly. "I don't know, I'm sure; some one must have brought him. Yes, do come again."

"Let's go," said Victoria, shortly, as Philippa left them, "I want to talk to you; I want to get out of this." Mrs. Durham looked astonishment, but Victoria persisted.

"Let's leave immediately, if you don't mind — that is — I'm upset."

Mrs. Durham sent a diagnosing glance over her charge and nodded, her face becoming serious. "Is anything the matter?" she asked.

"I don't know," answered Victoria, helplessly; "I wish I did."

Mrs. Durham promptly linked her arm through her friend's, and bore her rapidly down the room

to where the hostess stood talking in the centre of a little attentive circle.

"We want to extend our thanks to you," she said, "for the pleasure and the privilege of hearing such good poetry. We really have a great deal to say on the subject, but we have to go."

Victoria tried to tone down the abruptness of their departure, but was obviously uneasy and preoccupied. The poetess seemed disappointed. The sudden natural outburst of Victoria's admiration had led her to hope for one of the rare sympathies she occasionally inspired, and the pang of loneliness that followed on its non-fulfilment lasted long after "The Enchanted Mesa" had completely faded from Victoria's mind. Of such strange stuff is our sensitiveness made.

As the friends left the hubbub of the tea, and sought the shelter of Mrs. Durham's studio, neither of them spoke. It was not until the cigarette had gone out several times and Victoria had walked the floor sturdily for some half mile that the flood-gates were opened. During the interval Mrs. Durham settled herself in one

of the huge leather club chairs and watched her visitor with attention.

"Here goes!" Victoria broke out suddenly, flinging herself heavily into the chair opposite. She plunged into the story of the Auray robbery, described the Englishman minutely, the countess and her jewels, the nurse's story and its contradictions, the death of the child, the fruitless efforts of the police, Sonia's constant annoyance at being called upon to identify arrested persons bearing no possible resemblance to the criminal, her own return to America, her meeting with Valdeck and her difficulty in remembering where she had seen him — crowned by the sudden revealing glimpse of the countess's brooch on the breast of Philippa Ford, and the instant flash of recollection that, in spite of the change of hair and the disappearance of the mustache, showed her the mock O'Farrell in Valdeck the Pole.

Her friend heard her out without interruption, proof positive of a most unusual female intellect. When at last Victoria paused, Mrs. Durham began tearing the edge of a magazine into infini-

tesimal bits, a habit she frequently indulged in during moments of concentration.

"First, are you absolutely sure about the pin?" she asked, presently, more as an opening wedge than a question.

"Absolutely."

"And the man?"

"Still more so — if that is possible."

"Miss Ford said it had belonged to her mother. There might be two such pins in the world."

Victoria shook her head. "And two such men — no! Besides, Philippa is a born liar; it isn't even second nature with her, it's first nature. She didn't want me to think she had accepted such a present from a mere acquaintance; but I have known her to take as much and more from any man who would offer it to her. She recognizes no obligation in it. She sees it merely as tribute paid to her superlative beauty and wit. She would take the Kohinoor from the devil himself ten minutes after they had been introduced."

Mrs. Durham laughed. "It's no use cautioning her, then, concerning Valdeck. As far as I can see, the French consul is the person for you

to notify; let him take charge of the case. If it's a question of extradition, it's up to him; but you will have to be absolutely sure of your quarry. Where is Sonia?"

"In Paris."

"Do you think he recognized you?"

Victoria paused. "I'm sure I don't know. If he did, he hid it well. But I noticed that he didn't come anywhere near me after he once saw me staring at him, and I'm morally certain that the card the man brought Philippa was from him, accounting for his desertion of her, and making a rendezvous. Oh! Philippa would go anywhere if you made the situation sufficiently dramatic."

"Well," and Mrs. Durham put down the dilapidated magazine, "I wouldn't fret, dear. Tomorrow I'd call on the consul and lay the matter before him. He will probably have the man watched, perhaps get an order to search his apartments. More probably he'll do nothing at all until he cables to the chief of police. If the Vernon-Latours-what-you-may-call-ums are of sufficient importance, they'll follow the matter up, if not, they'll drop it — anyway, you will have

done all that can be expected of you. It's a curious coincidence, though — I'll use it in my next novel."

The mere statement of the case had relieved Victoria's feelings, the events sunk to their proper proportion with reference to herself; the shock of recognition was past, and the world was proceeding much as usual.

"I'm glad I told you about it," she went on. "One cannot see a thing in one's mind as clearly as a thing taken out, concreted and put into words; it then becomes an entity you can turn over and consider. When it's jammed inside your skull it takes up all the available room."

She stretched herself and relaxed with the graceful completeness of a cat, nerves and muscles let down from their tension.

"Anne," she spoke again, "I now understand why you keep your workroom so bare and plain. It makes one clear and concise in thought. I could never have stated my case so quickly — pardon a little bouquet that I throw myself — or so well at Madame Despard's, for instance.

There is nothing like large, bare spaces to make one clear-sighted and simple."

Mrs. Durham rose and looked at her watch. "Perfectly right, my dear Victoria. I've often wanted to hire a prairie."

CHAPTER III.

PHILIPPA thrust Valdeck's card into her bosom as she left the studio, and with a beating heart descended to her rendezvous. She found Valdeck apparently absorbed in the study of the index-board in the lower hall.

"Were you recognized?" she asked, in her deepest conspirator voice.

He started. "No, I think not, and, besides, he really knows nothing, but I am anxious to keep away from all possibly hostile observation."

"Of course," said Philippa, rather disappointed that the danger was not more imminent. She glanced at him sharply as they emerged into the street, and her quick intuition told her that Valdeck had been more disturbed than he was willing to own. "You are not telling me all," she said, reproachfully. "You have had a shock — oh, yes, I can see it! you can't deceive me —

and can't you trust me? I thought you said you did, implicitly."

He appeared to hesitate, then abruptly signalled a passing hansom.

"You will drive with me, Philippa?" he said, with sudden authority. "I will tell you, but we must be alone. You can spare me an hour? It's now half-past five."

Philippa considered a moment. "Very well. Tell him to drive round the Park; it's so dark we won't be noticed."

She stepped lightly into the carriage, putting her skirts into place as she settled back and affectionately making room for him. He gave his orders and leaped in beside her with the athletic ease she so much admired.

"Now, what is it?" she demanded, as the hansom jerked forward.

"Not yet. It's a horrid story, and I hate to say anything."

"Get it over with then," she suggested, archly.

"I am going away soon," he said, slowly, "very soon. There are so many reasons why I should. I wonder I have stayed so long. Wis-

dom and duty bid me depart, and yet, I have not the courage to go."

Philippa experienced one of the few real sensations of her life. The stab of this announcement so surprised her by its acute pain that she turned white to the lips, and the jarring of the carriage having displaced her hat, she did not think to readjust it — an oversight not to be credited by those who knew her well. She was silent a moment, unwilling to trust her voice. At last she moistened her lips and managed to ask "Why?" with a poor semblance of carelessness.

"First my work, my duty, then — because — as you must have realized, dear, — because I love you, and I must not interfere with your life and your future. I have nothing to offer; my fortune is pledged to the cause. I am practically banished, I live a life of forced concealment and intrigue that must make me everywhere, sooner or later, an object of suspicion. I can never hope for any real position to offer you. Besides, I have made you my ideal. I want to see you realize the hopes I have of you. I must see you queen among women, the courted, fêted, admired leader of your

world. You will marry — ah! yes, I have even dwelt on that, and it must be with one who will appreciate you and surround your beautiful body with the luxuries it deserves; who will supply the wants of your wonderful mind with the best that literature, art, and social intercourse can offer; who will give you the opportunity to develop into the wonderful woman you will be — for you are yet only a promise of what I hope for you."

He paused and gazed on her white profile, softened in the dusk till it toned into the dark background like some delicately painted miniature. This wholesale burning of incense at her shrine was as meat and drink to Philippa. From any man it would have been welcome; but coming from Valdeck it was food celestial. Moreover, a sense of relief filled her. She would not be obliged to refuse him; he was advancing from his standpoint the arguments she might have been forced gently to insinuate into his mind from hers. All she had to do now was play her game, a beautiful, heart-broken game. He need not know or guess her engagement to Morton

Conway. The pang of his announced determination to depart had passed away, leaving her once more her old calculating self.

But he wouldn't go. She should manage that. Of course he must leave sooner or later, but later — much later.

He took her hand and held it. She did not resist, but turned her blue eyes on his.

"I often wonder," she said, softly, "whether it would have been better had we never met."

He entered a vigorous protest. "No. This meeting is, and always will be, the crown of my life, the jewel in my heart. Whatever the cost, it cannot cost too much."

A long silence ensued in which the hansom jangled gaily through the dim poem of the twilight, punctuated at intervals by the staring lamps of the driveway or the passing flash of carriage lights.

"Will you do me a great favor?" he asked, suddenly. "Dine with me to-night. You can manage it; I know you can, you are so clever."

Philippa jumped. "Suppose we should be seen?"

"I'll manage that, if you will trust me."

She pressed his hand gently. "Trust you, of course; but it's awfully improper."

"I know it's not conventional; that's why I called it a great favor. But I can't let you go yet, dear. You see I have no ambitions or hopes for myself, only for you. I am to live by the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table, only by such scraps of your time as you will throw to me. You need never fear that I shall importune you. But to-night — when I have just told you my secret, when you have been so kind and patient — I want this one evening with you to cherish and remember. Just to break bread with you alone, to clink glasses with you alone, sit opposite you, as if I had the right to sit there always — yes, just to hear you called 'madame' by the waiter," he laughed, sadly.

Philippa hesitated. "Are you sure we won't be seen?"

"Positive! Why, I would give my life sooner than have one word said against you, and I know as well as you what the world is. The world never believes in a pure and disinterested

love — it does not wish to — it has itself to excuse by the faults of others."

"How true!" she murmured. Then she brightened with glee at thought of the forbidden pleasure of the *tête-à-tête* dinner. "Listen. Tell the man to drive to — West 57th Street; that's Laura Crosse's. They have a telephone. I'll call Aunt Lucy up and tell her I'm staying to dinner and going to the play. She'll ask to speak to Laura to verify — oh! she's horribly suspicious! — but I'll fix Laura, for I've helped her out lots of times when she was engaged to Tom. You must promise to get me home by half-past ten or eleven, for Auntie is going to dine at the Bishops', and she'll be home early — they are such bores."

"You are the best girl in the world." His voice choked a little. "I shall never forget your kindness to me, a poor beggar whom you hardly know in point of time."

"What is time?" she demanded, with fine scorn; "only what we make it. I knew you as soon as I saw you. I am never mistaken in

character, and you were doubly clear to me through sympathy."

He pushed up the little door of communication with the driver, and gave his orders. The hansom paused, wheeled, and started off once more into the darkness. The rest of the way they said little, but sat staring into the gloaming world outside, still hand in hand, till the glare of winking arc lights startled them into formality.

In the excitement of the declaration, Philippa had forgotten the trouble he had promised to reveal, but the recollection smote her and she questioned him suddenly. This abruptness of attack was the result of years of experiment. She had discovered that by firing a point-blank question or stating a good guess with decision, the truth was forthcoming in nine cases out of ten. The questioned persons were startled either into spoken admissions and explanations, or they showed symptoms easy for a shrewd person to interpret. To her surprise she learned nothing further from his face or voice.

"Later," was all he answered.

If there had been any wavering in her decision

to dine with him, it was past now; her curiosity had pushed down the balance in his favor.

The cab drew up before a handsome house at which Philippa glanced knowingly, collecting her forces before going into action.

"Wait round the corner," she ordered, as she stepped to the pavement and turned to mount the wide stone steps.

The driver obeyed, and Valdeck laughed silently as he noticed the force of habit back of the command. Evidently, "Wait round the corner" was a familiar phrase with this Philippa.

Meanwhile the object of his plans had been admitted to the elaborate hall by an elaborate butler who invited her to be seated in a parlor whose elaborateness was of the newest and most gorgeous variety, of the sort that secretly filled Philippa with delight, though openly she professed to scorn the upholsterer's style of furnishing as a sort of Cook's personally conducted tour in house decoration.

Mrs. Denison entered, all smiles and rustle. She matched her abode perfectly from the curled and undulated erection of her pale hair to the

belaced and bejewelled gray brocade of her tea-gown.

"My dearest girl!" she exclaimed, "are you going to stay to dinner? I'm delighted. You are so good to think of our mourning and how housed we are."

Philippa embraced her friend rapturously. "How sweet you do look! These grays and blacks are so becoming. You ought to kill off an uncle every few months."

"You dreadful girl!" smiled Mrs. Denison.

"But I'm not going to dine with you to-night, dear," Philippa continued, "for I want to dine at a love of a little Bohemian restaurant — oh, it's quite proper — with a party, you know, but Aunt Lucy wouldn't hear of it, you see. So I thought you might let me telephone from here, and tell her I was dining with you — won't you, dear? Auntie is such a stickler for etiquette, and I can't make her understand that everybody nice is going to such places now."

"Why, of course," Mrs. Denison volunteered, completely deceived by the excuse. "I'll telephone to Mrs. Ford myself; that will be better

yet. But do come in and dine any evening when you have nothing to do. It's so lonesome all by ourselves, and as we inherited so much by old Mr. Ventimore's will we positively can't go about, it looks so heartless."

"But think how you would have really mourned if he hadn't left you anything, you ungrateful girl! You're a dear, just the same, and I'm everlastingly obliged to you. You'll telephone at once, won't you? Auntie dines with the Bishops, and she'll leave the house by seven, they live so far up-town."

"At once, of course. Run on and have a good time, dearie. When we are able to go about, Tom and I are going to give some really Bohemian things ourselves, a tamale party or a cake-walk, you know; so get all the points you can for us."

Mrs. Denison conducted her guest to the portières, where the elaborate butler took her in hand and ceremoniously opened the doors as she passed out. She walked decorously down the steps till she heard the bang of both doors; then she hurried with joyful anticipation to the waiting

carriage. She jumped in gaily and settled herself.

"I've fixed it," she announced, with childish delight.

Valdeck looked his thanks, and called to the driver, who awaited instructions. "To Gagano's."

Philippa started. "Oh!" she asked, "do you think that's quite safe?"

He nodded. "Quite. We'll have a private room, and I'll manage it so you won't be seen."

The hansom rattled on, taking, by his direction, an unfashionable, smaller vein in the city's system of circulation, in preference to the greater and more frequented arteries. Philippa had by this time turned to her muttons with intent to shear to the very last thread of wool. Curiosity stalked hungry through her mind.

"Do tell me what was wrong. It troubles me to see you troubled, and we must get it over with; otherwise it will lie between us and make us both uncomfortable."

He was not ready to divulge, and turned to his love for her and descriptions of her loveliness

and how it affected him — divining that her own adored person was the only subject likely to distract her curiosity. In this he sufficiently absorbed her till the cab turned down a quiet side street and drew up before an unpretentious door, over which an illuminated sign announced "Gagano's Restaurant."

Delighted excitement thrilled Philippa as she pulled up her collar and drew down her hat, with the traditional gestures of disguise.

Valdeck restrained her as she gathered her belongings preparatory to alighting. "Stay here," he said, quietly. "I'll go up and arrange so you won't have to wait in hallways." He paid the driver, ran up the steps, and disappeared between the ground-glass doors.

Several minutes elapsed, during which Philippa, from the darkness of her shelter, looked out with fear and curiosity at the men and women who passed in the street or hurried into the restaurant. At last Valdeck came rapidly down the steps, glancing sharply up and down the street as he did so, assisted her to alight, and escorted her into the house. A narrow corridor opened before

her, stairs loomed upward, with an obsequious waiter bowing on the landing. A door to the right gave a glimpse of the main dining-room. It stood ajar, and, annoyed at the oversight, she turned her face away, and fled up the stairs. The floor above showed another narrow hall, where busy servants ran to and fro. To Philippa it was all evil and mysterious, and filled her with delighted trepidation. The sound of smothered laughter, the faint chink of glasses and plates, the sight of champagne bottles cooling in the silver-plated buckets on the floor, — all impressed her with a sense of delicious naughtiness. The obsequious waiter ushered them into a tiny room, and discreetly closed the door.

Philippa looked about her with interest. Before her stood a table, neatly set for two, adorned with a scanty bunch of carnations. Everything was worn. The mirror was scratched, the velvet of the upholstery showed the nap, the carpet was dulled by the frequent upsetting of viands. The air was hot, the only ventilation being a small electric fan, now motionless, fixed in one corner near the lights. A room attractive and repellent

enough, but to Philippa, soaked in French novels, it was the realization of the baleful and belauded *cabinet particulier*. Valdeck apologized for the shabbiness of his hospitality, but pointed out the fact that a meeting with any of their acquaintances would be practically out of the question.

The waiter, after discreetly knocking, entered with cocktails on a silver waiter, and presented the bill of fare and wine-card with a gesture worthy of Lord Chesterfield.

Valdeck acquitted himself of the task of selection, ordered the champagne to be *brut* and *frappé*, and by his evident knowledge of things culinary, went up several points in his guest's estimation.

Left alone once more, he seated Philippa on the divan, took his place on the chair opposite, persuaded her to remove not only her wraps but her hat, and showed himself a thoughtful and attentive host. Presenting her with the cocktail, he bowed gravely.

"*A vos beaux yeux*," he murmured, tenderly.

She drank the beverage, and as its glow began

to course through her veins, she raised her smiling eyes to his.

"What would our friends think of this?" she asked, again with that delightful ingénue blush of hers.

"Just at present I don't in the least care," he answered, gaily; "but I promise you they won't be able to say anything."

The waiter appeared with oysters.

"Are you still determined to go away?" she asked, after a moment's silence.

"I ought to —" he answered, uncertainly.

"But that's not the question. *Are* you, I said?" and she raised her violet eyes to his face, half-wistful, half-mocking.

"To explain just why," he said, gravely, "I must tell you. I was taken aback when I saw you this afternoon sitting with a girl I never expected to see again, a girl whom I saw last in Europe; whose gray eyes I shall never forget."

Philippa dropped her oyster-fork, and her eyes dilated.

"Victoria Claudel! For goodness sake, what do you mean?"

He appeared to hesitate, and the conversation ceased as the servant served the soup.

"My dear girl," he resumed, after a moment, "I must, to protect myself and your good opinion of me, do a thing that is considered, and rightly considered, dastardly among men. I must speak ill of a woman to whom I am indebted, more than indebted."

Philippa turned scarlet, her heart beat heavily. Here, indeed, was a dramatic situation.

"She is, I know, from your manner toward her, your very dear friend," he went on, "and you must not only forgive me for what I have to say, but both for my sake and hers, promise me the most rigid secrecy, the most absolute silence —"

"I swear!" said Philippa, her cheeks crimsoning with excitement.

"— even to her. She must not know that I have told you. But I know what a woman's jealousy can be and is. I know that Victoria would do all in her power to harm me. She is vindictive beyond belief, and all her intelligence, her strength and will go into her plans. I do not

know that she followed me, but I fear it. Now that she has found me, she undoubtedly will do her best to oust me from my position here. What stories she will circulate I cannot guess as yet; but I know from past experience what she can do. Has not one of your poets said, 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'? And to you, Philippa, to you she will certainly come with her accusations, for she will inevitably see that you have absorbed my life. Whatever I am, whatever I may have been, you know that you are my love, my only love, and I cannot bear that she should turn you from me."

Philippa was splendid. Holding out her hand across the table, she took his in a firm and friendly grasp. "You were right to trust me with your secret. She cannot hurt you in my eyes. But what shall we do if she tries to circulate anything against you among others? She has the advantage — she is known here, you are not. You cannot tell the reason of her hatred of you; that would be unforgivable in every one's eyes. Yet if you go away she may wither your reputation at her ease."

"If you stand my friend," he went on, "it is all I ask of fate."

"But she must not injure you."

Again the waiter interrupted, but Philippa was beyond paying any attention to his presence. Valdeck shrugged his shoulders.

"It can't be helped, unless, perhaps, you find out and tell me in what direction her enmity will show itself. I might plan to meet it. But that would entail too much on you. You could never play the ignorant; let her confide in you and show her hand. You are too open and clear a nature to meet the wiles of a woman of her stamp."

"Indeed I can — trust me. I'll know every plan, I'll fathom her every thought, I'll not leave her for a moment. If she doesn't come directly to me, and she is quite clever enough to work through other people, if she imagines I know anything or suspect her honesty, why, then I'll go to *her*. I'll give you my word that you shall know just what is afoot as soon as she does herself. It will be a little thing to do in return for your friendship."

Valdeck lost himself in a maze of thanks and adoring admiration.

"Isn't it strange," she murmured, "isn't it wonderful, that things should work out this way? I understand it all now. She pretended to be puzzled as to where she had seen you before — asked me who you were, to sound me, you see, concerning our relations. She seemed absent-minded and ill at ease. And then, when I left her, she happened to see the pin you gave me. She was really overcome, turned pale, and fairly shook me, demanding where I got it."

"Yes," he nodded, reminiscently. "She knew how much I thought of that trinket. I remember she once asked me to let her wear it, and I refused. She never quite forgave me. Of course when she saw it in your possession she was enraged. What did you say?"

Philippa colored. "Well, I couldn't tell her the truth, you know. I said it was an old thing of my mother's, but I saw she knew better."

He laughed, shortly. "Knew better!" Inwardly he congratulated himself on his judgment in taking the bull by the horns. He was certain

now to be informed of whatever danger threatened him, of what steps would be taken. Another week, and it made little difference what came out. Till then he must play the game carefully. He looked at Philippa, and felt grateful to his lucky stars that she was so fair to look on and so pliable to his will. It enabled him to throw himself heartily into his part. He always was fortunate with his women confederates, conscious or unconscious, he commented. There was Eugenia, what a jewel the woman was. It was unfortunate that the police had suspected her, it prevented his seeing her as often as he would like.

Squab and salad were served, and Valdeck came over to the divan and sat beside Philippa.

"Let's drop all this for the present," he said, gently taking her hand; "let's talk of you, it's a pleasanter subject; only tell me that this confidence hasn't completely barred me from your respect. What can *you* know of a man's life and temptations!" He bowed his head on his free hand and looked gloomily into the mirror opposite.

She followed his glance and gazed approval on their common reflections. How handsome he was! and how well she was looking herself! The wine and excitement had flushed her cheeks and lighted her eyes with a starry radiance; a dew of perspiration had dampened her hair and ruffled it into soft curls. Her satisfaction in her own appearance made her the more ready to admire him, made her the more lenient to his avowed fault; besides, what woman ever scorns to triumph over a rival in any man's estimation?

"A woman's intuition permits her to divine conditions that are not actually within her experience," she answered, softly, sipping the glass of champagne before her with grave appreciation, "and I think I can fairly say that you have not fallen in my estimation. One learns," and here Philippa looked vastly worldly-wise and bitter, "not to expect a man's life to be as spotless as a woman's, or even a woman's as spotless as it ought to be. I must own, though, that what you tell me of Victoria would surprise most of her friends more than it does me. I have never

quite held her in my esteem to the point of absolute trust. There is a suggestion of defiance in her Bohemianism. She permits herself liberties that are not wise. She lunches with any man she likes, whenever she pleases, in the most public places. I often used to speak to her about it, and she always resented it, maintaining that as long as a woman stayed in broad daylight, and in a public place, she was sufficiently chaperoned. But such things show a disregard of public opinion that sooner or later leads to graver offences, not only against the laws of convention, but against the laws of God."

Valdeck hid a smile with his serviette. She was too delicious, this girl. His curiosity began to rise concerning this Victoria whose character he had just destroyed. Evidently she was a woman of independence and intelligence. It was rather a pity to spoil her reputation; but it had to be done. Besides, he reflected, was it not a custom current in society, was it not sufficient to justify any calumny, that the person thus punished should happen to know things derogatory

to the calumniator? "The greater the truth the greater the libel" works more ways than one.

"Philippa," he said, apparently coming out of a brown study, "you are the sweetest, dearest woman in the world. I shall never forget your kindness and charity, as I can never forget your loveliness and truth. My lady of goodness! I believe there is not another such combination of beauty, brains, and sincerity on the face of the earth." "How she swallowed it all!" he added to himself.

She drew out her tiny jewelled watch and glanced at it with a pout. "We must go soon," she murmured, reluctantly. "Aunt Lucy keeps such close count of my every moment, and" — she turned her innocent eyes to his face — "I do so hate deception."

"And she really believes it," he thought, delightedly; "she honestly thinks herself the soul of truth!"

"Not yet," he begged aloud; "a few moments more or less count very little to Aunt Lucy, while to me — you don't realize what they are to me!

And when shall I see you again? To-morrow? where?"

Philippa remembered with annoyance that Morton Conway was coming to take her driving in the afternoon. She couldn't very well refuse. She had a luncheon engagement, and dressmaker's in the morning, dinner and theatre-party at the Wellsleys — oh, dear! The dressmaker would have to wait.

"I'll go over to Victoria's early in the morning," she said, slowly, "about ten — I can't very well go earlier. I'll make her tell me what she intends to do, and — let me see — suppose you wait in the Turkish room at the Waldorf, at twelve. If by any chance I should be detained, I'll call you up on the telephone at half after. I'll be there, though," she added, looking her sweetest.

"You are so good!" he said again. "Now that I have the assurance that you will not believe anything that will be said against me, — now that you know the very worst that can be said with truth, I can't tell you how relieved I am. Confession lightens one's load wonderfully. The

Catholic doctrine is founded on a real human need. If every one loved God as I love you — "

"Oh!" cried Philippa, interrupting with almost terrified emphasis; "don't, don't say such things — to compare me with the Deity!"

She was genuinely shocked, for Philippa was very devout on Sundays and in Lent.

"Forgive me," he begged, humbly. "I did not mean to hurt your beautiful faith. Unfortunately, I can believe in nothing — only in you and my duty to my fellow man."

She was not displeased. Atheism sat not unbecomingly on manly shoulders, though to her thinking it was to the last degree bad form in a woman. Religion, like one's evening dress, was the proper thing and indispensable for certain occasions, though she attributed her religious fervor to quite different emotions.

The more Valdeck turned the leaves of his companion's character, the greater was his amusement. It was like reading some written study of the ultrafeminine. It might be worth one's trouble to sketch out a romance with her for the sake of watching her clockwork. But time pressed;

another week and he would have dropped from this crude sphere as completely as if he had never existed — to reincarnate himself under another name, in another country, and build up an excellent reputation that would shield the sources of his wealth, if all went well.

Philippa rose, and began the various adjustments of hairpins and garments, always premonitory of her going forth.

"Must you go now?" he asked. "I won't tease; you know best — but must you?"

She nodded, almost sadly.

He bowed his head in acquiescence to the inevitable, and rang the bell for the waiter. Hastily settling his bill, he turned to her once more. She was carefully prodding her hat with a topaz-headed pin, as she studied her face in the glass. He crossed over and stood beside her. She thrilled with his presence.

"You are so beautiful!" he whispered. "May I?" And before she could protest he folded her in his arms, turned her flushed face to his, and kissed her on the mouth.

For an instant she yielded to his arm, resting

her head on his breast for the infinitesimal fraction of a second. A quivering delight mounted from her heart and dimmed her eyes. But in a moment she was herself again.

"Mr. Valdeck!" she said, severely. "And I trusted you in coming here!"

The tone was perfect. "Just as if she hadn't been waiting for that all the evening," he thought, admiringly. "She's a genius." He kept silent, only looking at her with humble, dog-like eyes, as a hound reproved for showing too much exuberance of affection.

With a petulant movement she caught up her jacket, pouted, smiled, looked at him and then at it, and finally held it out with an inimitable gesture of amused reluctance.

"You'll have to help me into it, I suppose."

He sprang forward, took the outstretched garment and clasped it fondly.

"No, no, it isn't for you to keep," she laughed.

The operation of getting into the wrap was prolonged, and difficult, numerous hooks had to be attended to and sleeves smoothed, to all of which Philippa laughingly submitted, unconscious

of the deft unfastening of her treasured jewel, and its sudden disappearance down a concealing sleeve. At the door he took her hand and kissed it fervently.

"Let me go first, dear," he said, passing in front. "I want to see if the coast is clear. I told the waiter to call a cab."

Feeling more deliciously wicked than ever, Philippa crept through the hall and down the stairs. All was quiet, and with the glee of a schoolboy who successfully carries out a dangerous prank, she sprang into the waiting carriage.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. DURHAM opened the door to Victoria's familiar knock. "Well?" she said, removing a thick cork penholder from her mouth. She wore a gingham apron plentifully besprinkled with ink-stains, and her hair showed signs of her recent labors.

Victoria threw down her muff and slung her fur collar across the room. "I saw the consul, and he has taken the matter up; but it seems there is red tape enough to strangle us all. I'm sorry I ever touched the thing."

"What is he going to do?"

Victoria subsided into a chair. "About what you suggested. He is going to cable to half a dozen proper authorities, — have Valdeck shadowed if they think best. I suggested having his rooms searched, but there are all sorts of difficulties. He's a Russian subject, or claims to be;

the consul intimated all sorts of horrifying international complications. He seemed disgusted that I brought the thing to him, and I must confess I'm sorry I did. If I hadn't seen that child die, I don't think I should have touched it, but — well, it's done now; the machinery is going."

"Yes," said Mrs. Durham, whirling about in her office chair; "it now remains to be seen who will be drawn in, and what sort of a sausage will be the result."

"I'm inclined to think I shall season it largely myself," Victoria answered, ruefully. "Philippa is going to make it warm for me when she finds herself dragged in by the ears — the brooch, I mean, with her pathetic little story about dear mother's heirloom, too."

Mrs. Durham chuckled, but sobered suddenly. "Be very careful," she advised, "how you go about that. She would be an unpleasant enemy. She, as the challenged party, has the choice of weapons, and unless I vastly misjudge her, they will be of a type that you wouldn't soil your hands with."

"I know it. Oh, why didn't you head me off?

I'll get myself and every one else into a hornet's nest."

"Because, dear, I believe that dangerous animals should not be left at large; such creatures owe their immunity to the trouble they give lazy hunters."

"And besides," added Victoria, "it isn't your fight, and it will be entertaining to watch."

Mrs. Durham swung completely about and faced her friend. "You have such a disagreeable little way of dragging the Sunday clothes off my rag doll, but it's invaluable from a literary standpoint."

"Apparently I'm to be a sort of god from the machine for every one's benefit but my own," murmured Victoria. "But the Philippa question is serious."

A knock at the door startled them both, and Victoria rose reluctantly to answer the summons.

"Good morning, dear," a well-known voice trilled, gaily. "I stopped in early, as you told me you were always home. May I come in, or do I disturb?"

"We were just talking of you." Victoria's expression was composite.

"Speaking of angels," Mrs. Durham added, rising to greet their visitor.

Philippa entered, more gorgeous than ever, rustling aggressively in her silk petticoats. Her light tan cloth gown, with its cleverly combined touches of gold and brown, set off her blonde prettiness to perfection. She felt a glow of pleasure as she noted Victoria's dishevelled appearance, and the bespattered apron that concealed Mrs. Durham's graceful figure. She regarded her friend with a new and cruel interest, bred of the last-night confidences. It was delightful to feel that she held this girl's reputation in the hollow of her hand — this girl who had let her read scorn of her, Philippa's, life and character — the girl whose appearance had forced her to hedge and definitely engage herself when she had other more interesting occupations. Truly, it was a sweet morsel. Her musings gave her an expression, half-sweet, half-sinister, and added a new tone of superiority to her voice. Victoria

was instantly conscious of the change, but was too full of her story to wonder at its origin.

The talk drifted on to indifferent topics as Mrs. Durham kept the ball rolling on things operatic and literary. Then she rose, excusing herself gracefully on the plea of work, and left the friends alone. Victoria plunged into the subject next her consciousness.

"I hope," she said, "you won't be angry, but I've something to say about that pin you had on yesterday."

Philippa's face showed a kaleidoscope of expressions, but a painful recollection dominated.

"Do you know, Victoria, I lost it — I can't imagine how. I was dining last night at the Denisons', and when I got home, it was gone. I can't imagine how; the fastening was secure. I must have pulled it off with my wraps. I'm heartbroken over it!"

"Lost!" cried Victoria, aghast, seeing the one plank of her proof against Valdeck disappear into thin air. She looked sharply at her friend. For once she did not question the truth of her statement; the chagrin was genuine. "It must

be found!" she ejaculated, sharply. "It must! You see" — and she floundered into her explanations — "I know more about that pin than you can guess. I know that Mr. Valdeck gave it to you; I'll tell you all. Of course, you couldn't very well tell me before everybody at the tea; I understood that perfectly. I admired the quick way you turned it off, and I ought to have had more tact than to blurt out such a question — but that's just like me."

Philippa played amazement. "Why, Vic, what are you talking about? Are you insane?"

"I'm going to tell you the whole story," Victoria went on, disregarding the interruption, "and let you judge for yourself."

Philippa's thoughts during the recital were a series of repressed exclamations. "Heavens! she's accusing him of burglary! Did one ever hear of such vindictiveness! Lucius was right; she's a danger in petticoats! What a horrible lie! Oh! it's murder now! What next, I wonder! The wickedness of it! She's overstepping herself; nobody will believe that. Can such women live, to play with a man's life and character like that?

She'd ruin him for vengeance! And the calm of her! She'll go to any length. Poor Lucius! How wise he was to tell me!" And running in and out of these comments, like an arabesque movement in a Persian rug, stood the Pharisee's thankfulness in every tone and variation. Never had Philippa felt more virtuous than now as she beheld the iniquities of her friend's character in all their blackness. Yet she must contain her righteous indignation if she was to save Valdeck from the net that would be cast about him.

Victoria's story reached its climax. Philippa's mental exclamation points multiplied. His mother's pin that he gave me out of his great love of me a part of the plunder! What won't she say! The very idea! She ought to be buried alive for such infamy. Never mind, a day of retribution will come, and the dispensing hand of justice may be the small white-gloved one lying here so meekly. She looked at the hand meditatively.

"What will you do?" she asked, at length, "for, of course, you will have to prove such a remarkable story."

Victoria described her visit to the French consulate, and the measures that would probably be taken.

Her listener's heart stopped beating.

Detectives! A search! Impossible! The whole villainous plot was clear as day. Evidently Victoria knew of Valdeck's secret connection with the Polish Educational League. The money he was collecting he would be unable to explain without implicating himself and the generous patriots, without putting himself and them practically into the power of the Russian secret police. Valdeck had assured her that even in America there was no safety once their positions were well authenticated.

On fire to put him on his guard, she cut short the interview. She must go at once. She must warn him, must help him at any cost. Her manner was strangely abstracted, and to Victoria's amazement she did not try to defend her protégé, but took her leave with unaccustomed quiet. Victoria looked after her with puzzled eyes.

"Now what on earth —" she began aloud.

"What did she say?" came from Mrs. Dur-

ham, peeping in between the curtains of her room.

"Nothing at all. I don't understand it."

"Didn't get angry? didn't make any demur to your statements concerning 'dear mamma's' jewels?"

"She didn't seem really surprised, either, now that I come to think of it. I can't make it out." Victoria sighed, wearily. "I wish I knew what she has up her sleeve — for she has something."

"Do you suppose," Mrs. Durham ventured, shrewdly, "that he has told her himself — oh, not the real thing, but some explanation?"

Victoria shook her head. "Hardly; it is too grave. It wouldn't do for him to block me by fighting fire with a fire sure to burn him just as badly."

"What then?"

"That's just it; I don't see any explanation. Oh, it's probably only imagination. She was quiet about it for the reason that she wasn't sufficiently interested. You know how one always attributes a deeper motive than the apparent one because the obvious appears too simple."

"That is the habit of wily people," said Mrs. Durham; "but Vic, my dear, you are not of that kind. You are direct; that is your power and your charm. I'll back an impression of yours against three of my own, and I'm not so very modest and humble about my own penetration. My advice to you, my girl, is, if you feel there is a screw loose in the elegant Miss Ford, watch her. You are very apt to be right."

"I don't intend," said Victoria, rising, "to bother my head about it longer. Mr. Conway and I are going to lunch at the Casino. Don't you want to come?"

Mrs. Durham shook her head. "No, I can't. I have to be at Miss Allison's at two."

"I'm sorry. I'd like you two to be friends. He is the rarest thing in the world, a well-balanced enthusiast."

"Why don't you marry him, Vic? You seem to admire him so much."

"I'm altogether too fond of him for that," she answered, gravely.

Mrs. Durham nodded. "Yes, as one nears the years of, say — indiscretion, it's well to treasure

an occasional illusion. It makes one think kindly of one's self as well as of others."

"Besides," Victoria went on, occupied with her own chain of thought, "he keeps my mind too busy when we are together; I have no leisure to think of anything but the subject in hand. And I've always observed that to fall in love with a person, there must be a possibility of an occasional silence, or, at least, a lull: then one's senses begin to take note. But with a person who keeps your intellect continually occupied, there is no leisure for emotions. That's why you see so many clever people fall in love with stupid ones, or those for whom they are entirely unfitted."

"Why don't you give lectures on the tender passion?" asked Mrs. Durham, with fine irony.

"Because," returned Victoria, "I should probably champion the idea of return-tickets, good for six months, for matrimonial explorers. How on earth does a person know whether he likes a country he has never seen? And from what I have known of my friends who have settled in the holy united states of matrimony, I think they all regret not having had the land prospected."

"I cancel your lecture tour, my dear. As I remarked before, your directness is startling. However, that does not alter my belief that you would be very happy married to the right man."

"But," objected Victoria, "how am I to know the right man? They all say they are — and I don't know."

Mrs. Durham stamped her foot. "Go on to your Platonic rendezvous; there is no convincing you of obvious facts."

Victoria planted herself firmly before her chum. "Do you want to get rid of me, or do you think twenty-five is so old that you wish to provide for me as one sends a pauper to the old ladies' home? I won't marry till I've found Galahad, Don Quixote, and Satan himself rolled into one. He'd be worth studying."

"And I'll bet you the proceeds of my next *chef-d'œuvre,*" Mrs. Durham replied, "that you marry the most ordinary of mortals, and before you're five years older, too."

"Cassandra!" and Victoria shook her friend by the shoulders.

"Cassandra's prophecies were fulfilled, if you

will recall your Iliad, my lady, so put that in your cigarette and smoke it."

"You are incorrigible," said Victoria, freeing her captive. "I'm going — I'll be home early, though. Morton is going driving with somebody, he told me, so we won't linger over the coffee."

Pushing in her rebellious hairpins with her familiar gesture, she found her hat and gloves, smoothed herself down, and waved a final good-by.

Twenty minutes later she was in sight of the low building situated in the centre of the Park. Morton was waiting for her, wandering up and down in the checkered light and shade under the wistaria arbor now bare and gray. His face lighted with affectionate greeting as he recognized the swing of her strong young body and the free stride of her walk.

"Hello, Empress of India, Queen of the Isles! I hope you're as hungry as I am."

She held out her hand in frank delight at his presence.

"Starved — and starving for a good old-fashioned talk with you, too." She gave his shoulder

a familiar pat, and they turned toward the restaurant. "It's like old times, isn't it? And I have so much to say that I'm positively choked."

He looked at her carefully, taking in every detail of her dress and person.

"You're looking extremely well, Tory. Do you know, I've often wondered why you haven't married."

She turned on him sharply. "I say, what has got into you all to-day? Mrs. Durham has been sermonizing from the same text, and now you begin. What put it into your head? Are you contemplating it yourself?"

With her usual logic she had hit the nail on the head, and Morton, who was bursting to tell, had a struggle to prevent his secret slipping from him. He sought the usual refuge of exaggerated humor.

"Alas! the only girl I ever loved has refused to tell me when she'll marry me. There are others, I know, and I have even been told that I'm a catch; but somehow — well, my affairs aren't interesting. "You tell me of yours. I had the table put here," he added, as he drew out her

chair for her, "because I knew that you would insist on 'out-of-doors' if you froze for it; but the lunch is hot, so I'll let you have your way."

"Line of least resistance," she laughed. "By the way, speaking of resistance, I see you won your case."

He nodded. "Yes, but it was more trouble than it was worth; the law —"

"Tell me," she broke in, abruptly, "do you know anything about extradition? I've managed to get myself mixed up in a possible Franco-Russian-American row, and I'm beginning to be sorry for it."

"You'll be considerably more sorry before you're through, my dear, unsophisticated infant. You'll have subpœnas and things served on you."

She held up an appealing hand. "Don't! You make me feel like a dining-table."

"You'll feel more like the dinner when they dish you up, young lady. How did you ever get mixed up in the thing?"

"That's the worst of it," Victoria answered, ruefully. "I did it. I've pushed the button, and I suppose it's opened the Exposition, like the

President and the World's Fair. Yes, you might just as well settle back and listen, for I'm going to tell you the whole story. This is the fourth time in two days — Mrs. D., the French consul, Philippa Ford, and now you."

"Why Miss Ford?" hastily inquired Morton.

"Because she was mixed up in it, too. I'm not shouting this about generally. I told Mrs. Durham because the thing struck me all of a heap, and I had to get it out or die. I told the French consul because I had to shift the responsibility. I told Philippa because I thought she ought to know, and I tell you because you are a sort of twin, and because I want your help. Bob is at college, and, besides, he's too much of a boy to be of any use."

"Don't forget to eat," Morton observed, kindly; "nothing like nourishment when you have to act and think."

Victoria obediently devoured what was put before her as she went over the familiar story. She was too engrossed to notice that her unvarnished opinion of Philippa's character for veracity and honor wrought a sudden and subtle change

in Morton's manner. He recalled Philippa's affectionate tributes to Victoria, and the first doubt that had ever dimmed his old and deep affection settled over his heart. After all, Tory was no better than the average woman swayed by jealousy, the fundamental fault; he had always believed her above such pettiness and personal spite. He was far too loyal in his love to doubt Philippa for a moment. She stood on the altar he had built for her, free from all question. The queen could do no wrong, and since she was unspeakably good and true and honorable, there was only one other opinion open to him. Victoria had been mistaken in the matter of the pin, or misled by some chance resemblance of design. As far as the story concerned Valdeck, he was more than ready to believe it. He had mistrusted the Pole from the first, and had watched with ever deepening dislike the mysterious stranger's advance into the good graces of his lady-love.

Victoria finished her narration and sat silent, staring out across the bare court to the deserted trellis and the empty carriage sheds.

Morton was uncomfortable. To have detected

Victoria in a meanness was a severe blow to him; he began to realize what an exalted opinion he had held of her. He had been foolish; women were women the world over — all but Philippa; his heart warmed at the thought of her.

"Are you sure you cannot be mistaken?" he asked, at length. "Resemblances are extraordinary, you know, and in the matter of the pin, no sane jury would convict a man because of such a bit of circumstantial evidence. The same jeweller might have made many similar pieces. Why shouldn't Miss Ford's mother have possessed such a jewel?"

Victoria's laugh was short and of the kind termed nasty. "Because Philippa has been trotting Valdeck about with her, evidently for some months — and two and two make four."

"Miss Ford would hardly accept such a present from any man, and much less from one she hardly knew."

"How little you know Philippa!" retorted Victoria, with cool decision.

"I thought you were friends." The tone of Morton's voice would have enlightened his hearer

at any other time, but her absorption in her "case" blinded her for the moment.

"Friends!" she answered, with an expressive shrug; "friends — what do you call friends? I've known her for years — granted. She uses me — and thinks I don't know it. So she chooses to call me her darling, and assumes that my attitude is one of adoration. It is not; I have told her so frequently. She amuses me. In return for my usefulness, she gives me a certain cynical satisfaction, an intellectual treat. She is a great actress of parlor comedy, worthy of the closest observation. If I were on the stage I would give years to the study of her method; it is pure, unalloyed, instinctive genius."

Every word of Victoria's speech carried with it her own condemnation to Morton's ears. It hurt him, stabbed him, tortured the fine affection that he had held so long. He longed to declare his position and champion his lady's cause, but his promise held him dumb. He stared unseeing at the bare winter landscape before him. A short hour before it had not seemed unbeautiful, the pale blue sky, the gray lace-work of bare

branches and the brown, snow-spotted lawns; the air had not seemed chill, nor the earth unkind. Now, it was all unmitigated ugliness.

"I can't advise you, I'm afraid," he said, coldly; "but I'd be careful if I were you. It's no light matter to bring accusations against man or woman — you have that to learn."

She looked up, hurt that the quick, never-failing sympathy and understanding, the whole-souled appropriation of each other's griefs, joys, and cares that had been a feature of their friendship, should fail her now. A quick thought of her long absence and of possible divergencies of character flashed over her. Her mobile face clouded sadly. She felt very shut out and alone. She, too, realized how much this association and companionship had meant to her. How she had idealized and turned to their perfect friendship as a prop and stay. Her throat ached cruelly. So it was over, this dream of an earthly friendship! Something had deviated them from their parallel during her three years' absence, in spite of their constant correspondence. They had grown in different directions. Filled with a

nameless sadness they sat silent, and in the silence the breach widened; they looked at each other as passengers on passing ships might watch the breadth of separating waters increase with each pulse-beat of the engines.

Victoria rose hastily. "It's very late, Morton," she said, with an effort at cheerfulness. "You have your drive, you say, and I must go back to the studio. Does your road lead my way, or do we separate here?"

Morton glanced at his watch. "My horses are at the driving-club; I'll walk down with you."

They walked fast and in silence for the most part, except for such desultory conversation as their mutual embarrassment seemed to make necessary. They parted with their old phrases of affection, but the hearty freedom had left them, and both felt it with a shock of loneliness. Victoria turned toward her temporary home, and Morton made his way to the club, where he ordered his team with such dejection that even the hostler wondered. While he waited he went over the interview. He honestly believed that

he looked at the case impersonally, for the bias lay too deep, was too much a part of himself, for him to realize its presence. He would not admit the possibility of anything but the most angelic sentiments in Philippa. Philosophers have contended that real Platonic affection between man and woman is impossible, yet he admitted to himself that the utter annihilation of all his respect for all his other friends could not grieve him as did this suspicion of meanness in Victoria. She had always stood to him as a type of the "big and white," as his college slang briefly and picturesquely put it. And after all she was only small and spotted like the rest of the world. He felt instinctively that he must readjust his valuation of all things.

The stamping of his horses on the wooden floor roused him, and he went to them with his usual slaps and sugar, mounted to the seat of his light runabout and signed his readiness. With the opening of the sliding-doors the friend vanished and the lover came. "When half-gods go, the gods arrive." Victoria the disappointing fled from his mind and made place for Philippa

the perfect. His heart sang as he pulled up before the wide, old-fashioned front of the house, and his smile held all his love and trust enthroned, as he saw her graceful figure step between the swinging-doors and descend to meet him.

She looked up into his face with eyes of such superhuman innocence that his soul went out to her. And this was the woman Victoria had dared to accuse of lying, duplicity, veniality, vanity, the quartet of feminine vices he most detested. Philippa, the down-trodden angel, appealed to all the chivalry in him. It was with a new and protecting tenderness that he assisted her to her place at his side. Heretofore she had dazzled and baffled him, now she was his to shield and comfort, and the joy of it was very keen.

"Well, dear?" she said as they turned toward the Park.

"Very well, dear," he answered, happily. "And you?"

"I'm tired," she said, her voice full of the infantile, pathetic quality that so endeared her to those who did not know her. "Let's see, I dined out last night, since you had your old

class dinner to go to; and to-day I called on dear Victoria, and I have just been lunching with a lot of girls. Awfully stupid — I hate girls' affairs, anyway. They are all gossip and backbite, and I hate it so!"

Morton, in his thirst of her every look and movement, very nearly ran down a nurse and baby-carriage. She laughed indulgently and merrily. Life was very exciting and full just now; she almost forgave him for being engaged to her.

"What have you been doing all this while? You haven't accounted for your time yet, you know."

He touched up the off horse as he answered: "Class dinner last night, rather good fun; and this morning — well, just some business that wouldn't interest you; and then I took Victoria out to lunch at the Casino. After that I came for you."

Philippa divined at once that the "lie" was in circulation, and she took the bull by the horns.

"I suppose she took occasion to abuse Valdeck?" she said, tentatively.

Morton was surprised.

"Yes, I intended to speak to you of it. She told me she had put you on your guard. You remember I told you, dear, that I hardly thought him a gentleman."

Philippa flamed. "Between saying a man isn't a gentleman and accusing him of murder and burglary there is a long stretch."

"Then you think she is entirely mistaken?"

Philippa hesitated. "You know how fond I was of her, and I know how much you thought of her; yet, Morton, dear, — but I can't help it, I am forced to believe she is doing this thing out of sheer vindictiveness and personal spite. It hurts me more than I can tell you to say such a thing, — but I can't help it, it's true." Her voice quivered, but how satisfying it was to say it!

Morton's heart stood still. "What makes you say that?" he asked. "Just what do you mean?"

"I can't very well tell you all. She knows that I guess the truth, and I suppose she will try and work me into the disgrace she is preparing for Valdeck, but I have you, Morton, and

nothing else matters. Tell me, didn't she try to shake your confidence in me in some way?"

Morton remained silent, and Philippa understood.

"She told you that story about my" — a tear crept into her blue, childlike eyes — "my poor mother's pin. She told me she knew Valdeck had given it to me. The very idea!"

Morton was evidently aghast. "But why on earth," he exclaimed, "should she do such a thing?"

"It's a very delicate subject," — she blushed deeply, — "but I have heard it — I mustn't tell you just where, but on good authority, for it was pretty well known in Paris, there was a love-affair, and she is furiously jealous — even of me, when she found that I was his friend. She interprets every one's feelings for the man by her own sentiments, and she is bent on ruining him — and me, too, if she can incidentally. She is circulating a lie, a wicked, cruel lie. She accuses him of robbery, and by inference, she accuses me of helping him; I believe that's about what it amounts to; at any rate, she says I accepted

presents of jewelry from him. She states that she recognized my poor mother's pin as part of the stolen property. It's outrageous!"

Morton set his lips hard and cut his horses sharply with his whip. "I don't remember this pin of yours, Philippa," he said, after a tense moment, more to say something than to voice any particular thought.

She colored quickly. "It's gone — I don't know how or where. I had it on yesterday, in fact it was in the afternoon at a tea that she pretended to recognize it. I dined with some friends, but when I reached home it was gone!"

"Gone!"

"Yes, gone, and where, unless Victoria stole it for some purpose, I don't know."

Morton shrank as if he had been burned. "Don't say that!" he begged, huskily. "Don't make this wretched thing any worse than it is."

"You couldn't," Philippa murmured, darkly. "I never would have believed it of her — never. But some awful change has come over her since she has been away; she is not the same."

Morton nodded, and drove on in silence.

Rapidly he pieced out the two conversations, one by the other. Philippa was the unquestioned soul of honor, consequently it was her story Victoria's confidences completed, not Victoria's substantiated by Philippa's comments. He was inexpressibly saddened. Even the radiant presence of his lady-love failed to rouse him from the mournful apathy into which he fell. He was still too loyal to the old affection to talk over the miserable downfall, even with Philippa. But something, and that his very darling illusion, had vanished from his life, and he faced, sadly enough, what he believed to be a loathsome reality.

The drive was completed in silence on his part, with chattering small talk on hers. She had winged her shaft and sent it home, and now watched its venom spread with a light-hearted satisfaction worthy of a Lucretia Borgia of psychology. She had nothing now to fear from Victoria, and she was at the same time vindicating and serving Valdeck, in whom she confided with something of the blind faith that Morton reposed in her. Properly circulated, in

ten days the story of Victoria's past would effectually sift among her friends and acquaintances, and cut her off silently and surely from all social life. The wicked slander against Valdeck would fall of itself, once the spring of vindictiveness was exposed to the public gaze, and Lucius, noble, generous, patriotic martyr, would pass over the net that was set for his feet, and his tormentor be herself involved in the meshes!

CHAPTER V.

TEN days passed eventless to Victoria until the morning of the eleventh, which was marked by a letter from Sonia. In this, her friend wrote affectionately of everything and of every one in their old circle, and concluded with a request for information concerning the Auray robbery, she having been notified to hold herself in readiness to identify the criminal if caught. The long and rambling epistle closed with a bit of information that set Victoria thinking.

"The strange thing is," wrote Sonia, "that our inky countess has disappeared, so the official, a very chatty and sociable individual, informed me. She suspected the maid — you remember her — of being in collusion with the thief. Unfortunately, this did not dawn on her till the said Abigail had departed for parts unknown, which she did shortly after the burial of the child. The

police have been searching for them both, and are inclined to think that the tragedy unsettled the poor lady's reason. However, she went supplied with a replica photograph of Valdeck from the rogues' gallery here, and plenty of money. She took no one into her confidence, as far as my informant knows. Strange, isn't it? I can vividly imagine that gaunt, black, half-crazed woman travelling aimlessly over the world in search of the man who killed her daughter, and the woman who aided him. A sensational story from first to last! And now, it seems, from your far-off land a new chapter is to be sent out. I must own I'm interested. Be sure to write me all the news, and don't be surprised if at any moment the steamer lands on the shores of freedom your old friend and companion, Sonia Palintzka."

Victoria re-read the letter, stuck it on her file, and leaned back, running her hands through her heavy hair. "So, the maid had at last been suspected!" She remembered with vivid clearness the scene in the dying child's presence, when the woman hysterically gave in evidence a descrip-

tion exactly contrary to that of the pretended Englishman. She recalled in particular the words referring to the hands, "hairy, rough, and callous, like those of a working man." Valdeck's hands were long, slim, and gentlemanly. At the time she had put this discrepancy down to fright, to the possibility of a second marauder. It now appeared to her as a wilful desire to mislead, to throw the pursuers off the scent. Jumping to her feet, Victoria began the regular pacing of the room that with her betokened perturbation of spirit. After all, the black countess's quest might be in the right direction. Suddenly she stopped short.

"I'm sure of it! I'm sure of it!" she exclaimed, aloud, to the empty room. "That woman chloroformed herself when she heard the noise outside in the hall. I remember the cloth over the gag was loosely tied and very damp. The gag was a mere blind that doubtless Valdeck put on, the more readily to exonerate her! I'm sure of it! I have a feeling it is so." Then she mused more quietly. "How this thing has been resurrected! Its influence is stretching over my

life again, and I thought I had left it far behind in little, old-world Brittany. Here it comes up in modern, commonplace New York. So the maid was in it with him? I wonder I didn't think of it before. If ever the black countess does catch up with them — "

The rattle of a latch-key interrupted her, and a moment later Mrs. Durham entered, shut the door behind her, and stood regarding her friend with a face at once serious and questioning.

" Look here," Victoria began, " I've just had a letter — "

Mrs. Durham threw herself into her pet leather chair and raised her veil. The movement was instinct with gravity. Victoria stopped short in her sentence and looked curiously at her.

" What is it? " she demanded. " Has Delmonico's burned up, or have the hansom-cabbies gone out on strike? "

" You won't laugh when I tell you," Mrs. Durham burst out. " I'm sure I don't know how to tell you, or where to begin — but begin I must. Victoria, I have heard the most awful stories that are being circulated about you! "

"About me?" Victoria shrugged her shoulders. "People must talk about some one. I haven't been home long, so naturally they take it out on me — I'm new. What do they say? that I drink absinthe by the quart, or dance the latest Parisian *danse eccentrique* on the studio roof? I'm prepared for anything."

"Indeed you are not! Heavens! do you suppose I'd care for any such trifle as that? A slander of that sort is only a bored and unoccupied society's way of paying a compliment, and I tell you — Well, I might as well blurt it out. They are saying you were mixed up in an abominably disgraceful love-affair in Paris!"

Victoria sprang to her feet and stood bristling and defiant. "Who says such a thing?" she demanded.

"And," continued Mrs. Durham, hotly, ignoring the question, "I am told that out of revenge and jealousy you have endeavored to ruin the man's character by bringing terrible and unfounded accusations against him!"

"You're crazy!" Victoria interposed.

"Nothing of the sort."

"Nobody would circulate such nonsense."

"Well, they have."

"Who are they?"

"Three people to-day."

"Do they mention any one, or is this all in the air?"

"No, they give names."

"Who?"

"Whom do you suppose? — Valdeck!"

"Valdeck?"

"Valdeck."

"There's only one person who would — "

"Of course — "

"Philippa!"

"Naturally."

"What does it all mean?"

"It's beyond me!

"I recognized your friend's fine Italian hand at once, but you can't prove it easily. Suppose she denies saying anything?"

"But why should she do this?" exclaimed Victoria, utterly at sea.

"She is infatuated with him."

"What of it? That's no reason for saying I ever knew him in Paris."

Mrs. Durham settled herself and compressed her lips. "Don't you see? She wants to nullify your story if it should get out. Well, I gave the ladies who 'thought I ought to know' a piece of my unvarnished mind for crediting such a thing — or listening to it, for that matter — but not till I had pumped them sufficiently to trace the information in the direction of your charming friend. Now, Victoria, dear, we must hunt this thing down; bring every one face to face with his neighbor who handed on the gossip. And when we have sifted everything down, we will take action."

"But," cried Victoria, bewildered for once, "I don't see any reason — there's no motive. People don't murder without a motive; why, then, should they kill a person's character without one?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Durham replied. "But I tell you, my dear, we will find out."

Victoria seized the poker and played havoc

with the fire for a few moments; then she rose from her crouching position with a spring.

"I'm going to interview Philippa this very afternoon. Will you come with me?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Durham. "You must head this gossip off at once. You have only your unsupported word at present, but proof can be readily forthcoming, and Philippa will have to give the source of her information. If you must have a slander suit, you can get healthy damages."

"What I want," Victoria broke in, viciously, "is the privilege of branding the person who started that rumor with the red-hottest iron in the city. Damages won't give me any such physical satisfaction!"

"You're too primeval, my dear," her friend commented. "But I must confess that perhaps the whipping-post — However, first catch your scoundrel before you prepare the boiling oil."

Victoria smiled gloatingly. Suddenly she darkened. "Do you know, I believe that Philippa has been persuading — but no, he wouldn't believe such things of me, even if we have diverged."

"Who?"

"Morton. He hasn't been near me for over a week."

"Well, Philippa knows him, doesn't she?"

"Yes. But he wouldn't believe such stuff if he heard it. And even if he did, it would make no difference as far as he is concerned. He would say I had a right to do as I pleased."

"Oh, with a woman in the case you can't tell," Mrs. Durham wisely suggested. "How well does he know Miss Ford?"

"I'm sure I don't know — I've been away so long. But" — and memory brought up a sudden picture of his face — "he was rather put out when I dissected her character for his benefit the last time I saw him. However, we'll clear it up. Put on your things and come."

She snatched her hat airily and harpooned it with a hat-pin, while Mrs. Durham proceeded to a more careful and leisurely toilet.

"I'm glad we're going to have it out while I'm still hot and have it all fresh in my mind," Mrs. Durham remarked, as they emerged from the building into the raw air of the outside world.

But Victoria spoke not at all during their hasty journey to the old Verplank mansion.

As they turned the corner they caught a glimpse of Morton just disappearing between the storm doors. Victoria was somewhat taken aback, but Mrs. Durham laughed.

"All the better, before two witnesses. Now for it."

They alighted, paid the cabby, and mounted the steps slowly. Victoria's heart beat hard, for she heartily hated a scene, while her friend as heartily rejoiced as she saw a fresh incident for her new novel rapidly developing in real life. They were admitted by the butler, who held aside the green curtains of the reception-room into which they passed single file.

Morton and Philippa rose from the divan somewhat hastily, and Philippa held out her hand with languid grace and a murmur of "So glad," which froze on her lips as Victoria deliberately thrust both hands in her muff, and Mrs. Durham's clear, light eyes gimleted into her hostess's violet orbs. She opened the battle without parley.

"Miss Ford, I have come with Miss Claudel,

as a married woman and her close friend, to demand of you the meaning of certain lies I have heard coming unmistakably from you, which concern the private character of Miss Claudel."

Philippa's jaw dropped. In spite of her great self-control, she could not prevent an anxious glance in the direction of her lover. In a flash she realized that she had overreached herself. That in her anxiety to help and shield Valdeck, she had exposed her own precious person.

Victoria, having the most at stake, was the most nervous of all, and her pallor was misinterpreted by Philippa, who, to do her justice, had not the slightest doubt of the truth of Valdeck's statement. She pulled herself together haughtily, ignoring Mrs. Durham's speech.

"I notice," she said, icily, "that Miss Claudel has very little to say for herself in this matter. Doubtless you have dragged her into the interview against her wishes. But as Miss Claudel has been one of my friends, for her sake I will let what you say pass."

Victoria recovered her power of speech. "What on earth are you saying, Philippa? I

don't understand you. You seem to think I have something to hide!"

"Really!"

Victoria's face hardened. "We have come to ask you from whom you obtained this pretended information, as we have traced most of the current gossip to you."

Morton had held his breath for some moments. This being in the presence of a three-cornered woman's conflict daunted him, as it well might any man, however stout-hearted, particularly when one of the contestants happens to be a fiancée, and another a lifelong friend. His loyalty to Victoria flamed up with the hope that she might clear herself of the accusations brought against her. For an instant he almost hoped she would avenge the hurt. Then the loveliness of Philippa triumphed, and he felt only the sting of the insult offered her. Her voice came to him cold and distinct.

"I have heard this story from more than one reliable source; but as the information was confidential. I am not at liberty to give names."

"Then," broke in Mrs. Durham, "Miss Claudel's suit for slander will be brought against you."

"Suit for slander!" Philippa murmured, aghast.

"Suit for slander!" Morton exclaimed, in anger.

"Suit for slander, Miss Ford," repeated Mrs. Durham, coolly. "What else do you expect? You could have foreseen that from the beginning. Such infamous lies are not put into circulation without —"

"Lies!" hotly interrupted Morton, to whom Philippa gladly ceded the floor. "Lies! Let me tell you — no, Philippa, permit me to handle this case for you; it is my right. Ladies, Miss Ford is engaged to me, and —"

He stopped short at sight of the blank sorrow and surprise on Victoria's face.

Forgetting all but her old affection for Morton; forgetting the object of her visit and Philippa's presence, she advanced to him with a sudden gesture as if to shield him from a blow.

"Oh, Morton! No! no! You can't mean it!"

The words were wrung from her by sudden emotion. There was no doubting their sincerity.

Mrs. Durham was silent with surprise; but Philippa was eloquent with mortally wounded pride.

"You dare speak so! to my very face!" she cried, crimson with passion. "You — a notorious woman — yes, notorious! a woman who loses her character wilfully, and then attempts to blacken a man's reputation with the meanest, most despicable lies!" She choked with anger.

Mrs. Durham turned on her fiercely. "So you make this statement as a matter of personal knowledge, do you? Mr. Conway, you heard what Miss Ford has just said — not even referring to any informant, but making a statement pure and simple."

Philippa exploded again.

"And you! — you! Leave this house at once!"

Morton restrained her.

"Philippa, dear, don't! You forget yourself. Mrs. Durham, I hardly think Miss Ford can continue this painful interview."

"I won't be quiet! I won't be silenced! I

will speak out! How dare you," she cried to Victoria, for hysteria had its grip on her, "you, who haven't a shred of decency!"

Mrs. Durham turned white, and her voice had the edge of a frosted knife as it cut to the quick.

"So, Miss Ford, no shred of decency! And what do you say of a young woman who dines in a private room with a foreigner whom she scarcely knows, when it seems she is engaged to another man — dines in a private room in the most disreputable restaurant in the city! Yes, I mean you, Miss Ford!"

There was a moment of awful suspense. Philippa, taken completely off her guard, saw her world crumbling about her. Her face twitched pitifully for an instant, and her knees bent. She sank on the divan with a strange, broken awkwardness.

Victoria, no less astonished, looked at Mrs. Durham blankly. But that lady stood her ground with the calm relentlessness of an executioner.

Morton's voice was hoarse and trembling as he turned on her.

"You shall answer to me for this."

"I shall be delighted," she replied. "My proofs, unlike Miss Ford's, will be readily forthcoming. When would you like to see them?"

Philippa sprang to her feet.

"Morton, if you love me, don't give them the satisfaction of listening. You know it isn't true. Can't you see that they are trying to draw your attention from Victoria by making this attack on me?"

Mrs. Durham persisted, coldly. "Miss Ford, will you mention your informant in the matter of these accusations against Miss Claudel?"

Philippa was infuriated.

"I will not! I will not!" she insisted, and then, with a high scream of laughter, she burst into tears.

No one had heard the bell, or the opening of the door, and not until Valdeck was actually ushered into the room, did any one realize the presence of an outsider.

He took in the situation, and paled.

"Excuse me — I — intrude."

He was about to withdraw, when Victoria barred his way.

"No," she cried, "you come most opportunely. You may clear up matters. Miss Ford, or some one else, has accused me of Heaven knows what kind of a love-affair in Paris — and with you! Do you dare to make such a statement?"

"I understand," Valdeck answered, after a moment's hesitation, "that you have made the statement that I was wanted for — Heaven knows what crime in France. I have to thank you, I think, for an investigation of my effects recently made, and the espionage of the police — the stories balance each other."

Victoria's jaw fell. "Do you mean — "

"One story is as true as the other," he answered, lightly.

"What I said was true!" she broke in, hotly. "I will swear to it!"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Then you cannot expect me to deny. But I fear it will require more than your testimony, Miss Claudel — "

A sudden cessation of Philippa's tears, and a quick exclamation from Morton broke in on them.

"She's dying! — quick, quick — water — a doctor!" Then turning savagely on Victoria and

Mrs. Durham, Morton raged, "You've killed her — you've killed her!"

Mrs. Durham shrugged her shoulders. "Fainting is an easy way of avoiding an awkward situation," she observed, sententiously.

"I will go for a doctor," volunteered Valdeck.

"You stay and see it out!" Victoria commanded.

But Valdeck was already in the hall and hurrying down the steps to his hansom.

"Go!" commanded Morton, fiercely, "go! You have killed her!"

"John," said Mrs. Durham to the butler, as she passed out, "go fetch a maid to attend Miss Ford."

CHAPTER VI.

THE next morning Philippa lay in her elaborate bed with the violet hangings, and ruminated. She was charming in a white silk negligée, her yellow hair softly framing the interesting pallor of her face and the not unbecoming lustre of her weary, sleep-hungry eyes. She was conscious of it, but was too miserable to feel satisfied. For the first time in her life she admitted a doubt of her talent as a diplomat, and a dawn of real conditions vaguely lighted her mind. She realized that her conceit, her belief in her own social invulnerability, had led her into a terrible *impasse*.

She twisted uncomfortably and drew the bedclothes round her as she contemplated the situation. She strove to collect her wits and think clearly; but memories of the previous day rose suddenly before her, visioned with insistent ter-

ror. She flushed crimson with mortification and rage.

She was loath to admit it, but she had bungled, bungled fearfully. And worst of all, what must Valdeck think of her! She had talked too much for either his plans or hers. And she began to realize in what dangerous places she had spread her fatal information. She had left her tracks uncovered. She moaned aloud and twisted anew, recalling a thousand insinuations she had let fall, a thousand confidences rawly made. She had committed herself, and must take the blame or openly throw it on Valdeck — where it belonged. Here she buried her face in the pillow in agony. She could not do that; she must shield him.

The one spark of womanhood in her false and selfish nature was awake at last in his service. She loved him! She knew it now! Loved him! loved him!

She lay still for some moments, buried in a blissful misery. Then she shivered convulsively. And what of her dinner with him at Gagano's? She had been seen — by whom? Mrs. Durham had the story straight enough. But Valdeck

would deny it; she would deny it. Mrs. Denison would substantiate her story of dinner with her. But the husband — Philippa's conceit lifted its humbled head — he would have to be won over. Morton would never believe it. But heavens! how near she had been to betraying herself when the mine was sprung. She congratulated herself on her fainting fit, the first well-managed move of her disastrous campaign.

She glanced at the little silver clock on the table by her bedside, sat up and rubbed her face, stiff from the night's visions and vigil.

"Come what would," she thought, "she must fulfil her duty to Valdeck. She had his secret in her keeping. More than that, concealed under the bed lay a despatch-box that contained the trust moneys of the 'Polish Educational Society.'" A glow of returning self-respect passed over her, as she thought of the confidence he reposed in her. "Hers was the hand he had selected to help him in his hour of need." She recalled the momentous interview when he had begged her to keep his treasure for him until such time as she should

be able safely to transfer it, and the directions she had received for its disposal.

She was on the point of getting out of bed to make sure that the box was still there, when she distinguished her aunt's step in the hall, and quickly sank back among her lace-frilled pillows.

Mrs. Ford did not give herself the trouble of knocking, but marched magnificently into the sanctuary of beauty. She was clad in a walking-suit of a military cut and many brass buttons, and was even more than usual the drum-major. Her face suggested court-martial, however, and Philippa winced. The aunt stood for a moment by the bed, and regarded the niece with cold-blooded appraisal.

"You are a good-looking girl," she remarked, at length; "and I have made considerable sacrifices of my comfort, as a speculation on your chances. But it seems you are a fool! — and so am I, for believing in you."

Philippa rolled over, and presented a view of her back.

"I am informed that there was a scene here

yesterday, in which Miss Claudel, Mrs. Durham, Morton Conway, and that Valdeck participated."

"You have been gossiping with the servants, I see," commented her listener.

Mrs. Ford flushed, but continued, icily:

"Never mind how I secured my information; I have secured it — that is the principal thing. But from what I heard yesterday in several houses I expected some trouble. There are many unpleasant stories afoot concerning Victoria Claudel, and every one quotes you as authority."

Philippa groaned inwardly.

"Who told you such an extraordinary thing? I can guess, if the world can not. And it strikes me that your intimacy with Valdeck must have reached a remarkable pass before he would confide to you his love-affairs, real or invented. Now if you give Valdeck as authority for this scandal, the world will say what I have said. If you do not quote Valdeck, you must answer for the story yourself. Now what will you do?"

There was silence in the abode of beauty.

"There is only one way for you to clear the board. Get Morton to marry you at once, quietly,

and go abroad. You haven't sense enough to think of that for yourself, so I came to tell you. And another thing. If you want to save yourself, drop that scallawag Pole. Furthermore, if the worst happens, you needn't come to me — with a slander suit on your hands, your engagement broken off by Morton, and the open secret of your affection for a man whose popularity is entirely mushroom, and of whom nothing is known except a few letters of introduction carelessly given."

Mrs. Ford rose without relaxing the austere anger of her face, and sailed majestically from the room.

"Devil! devil! devil! devil!" said Philippa, under her breath, as the door closed upon her.

Philippa endured another half-hour of agonized contemplation of her life's chessboard. At the end of that time she rose, fagged and worn, and looked about her miserably. Her aunt was right. She must sacrifice Valdeck, marry Morton, and go abroad. Her hand sunk limply in her lap as she seated herself on the edge of her bed.

"Sacrifice Valdeck! Never see him again —

never again!" For a moment she sat staring in the mirror before her, for the first time in her life blind to her own image.

Suddenly something deep within her seemed to break. She heard a sob, realized that it came from her own aching throat, and throwing herself on her bed again, she gave herself up to a passion of weeping — not tears such as she had shed before, but tears that seemed to swell and rise from the very depths of her heart, and to find their way to her eyes in hopeless agony.

How long she lay crying she did not know, but at last, realizing that action would soon be required of her, she washed her red and swollen eyes and proceeded to her toilet, which had somehow lost its usual charm. She dispensed with the services of the maid, preferring solitude and the difficulties of hooking her own collar. She selected the plainest tailor gown and most sad-colored blouse, theatrical to the last. As the final hook was fastened, and the last pin adjusted, a timid knock called her attention.

The maid entered, with such an assumed look of unconcern that Philippa was unpleasantly con-

scious of the inevitable talk below-stairs, occasioned by yesterday's storm. The woman presented the silver tray on which lay her mistress's morning mail. Philippa collected it quickly and nodded dismissal. She had hoped for a word from Valdeck. There was only a wedding-card, a note from the dressmaker, and a plain envelope with a typewritten address, that she left to the last, thinking it an advertisement or a bill. Its contents, however, stopped her heart and then set it going violently.

A few lines in the well-known handwriting:

"My beloved Lady Philippa: — One last service I beg of you. Go to the *Germanic,* which sails to-morrow, Wednesday, at two. Give the box to a lady who will meet you there in State-room 148. She will wear a tan ulster with blue velvet collar and hold a bunch of carnations. Address her in French as Madame Tollé. I am watched too carefully to trust putting in an appearance; but I trust you even as I would myself. God reward you, my beloved, my own, for your goodness to me and a just and noble cause."

Obviously this had been written before the scene of the previous afternoon. She consulted the postmark and found she was right.

"Two o'clock!" She glanced at her watch. "Half-past twelve already!" Hastily pinning on her toque and selecting a blue chiffon veil that disguised while it enhanced her charm, she pulled out the despatch-box from its place of concealment. It was very heavy. Wrapping it about in thick paper till it resembled a large package of books, she addressed it to Mme. Tollé, Room 148, S. S. *Germanic,* in case anything should prevent her interview with the mysterious woman. Going down-stairs, she notified the butler that she would not be home to lunch. Then she ate a cracker and drank a glass of sherry, for her emotions had consumed her strength. This done, she started on her journey.

At the door a qualm of fear caught her. Her aunt's words rang in her ears: "Drop that scallawag Pole if you want to save yourself." But the warning passed unheeded. Her love, now watered by her tears, had grown in strength and luxuriance. She would serve him in this last re-

quest. She would save him and the cause he loved, even if she must put him out of her life forever, after this one last effort to play his providence.

She called a cab, and sank upon its cushions restfully. The jangle of harness and the rattle of wheels made a soothing music to her strained and quivering nerves.

When she reached the long wharf, Philippa woke from her apathy, and telling the man to wait, made her way under the huge shed, among the throng of travellers, agents, baggage-men, and teamsters. All was bustle and confusion, swinging crates and banging trunks. The gangways were thronged by hurrying men, people hung over the rail and talked to others on the dock. Stewards flew by, carrying hand-luggage, marked "Wanted"; steamer-trunks bumped along toward the second deck, where busy men lined them up for the sloping gangway of the first cabin. She went directly to the saloon, all mahogany and gold, plate-glass and shimmering brass-work. There were heaps of flowers, books, and candy-boxes lying on the long,

stationary tables. Excited people were claiming their belongings, or holding high-voiced conversations. The stewards rushed madly by, beset with countless questions, and unable or unwilling to answer any. Philippa had to wait. A hasty exploration of the corridor near at hand showed her that, numerically, she was far from her destination. A fair-haired, stupid-eyed, German cabin-boy, who hugged a trumpet and gazed vacantly on her, was at last persuaded to inform her that 148 would be on the other side, and "oop-stairs."

Following his directions, Philippa at last found the cabin numbers dwindling — 180, 176. She came out of one of the side aisles, and came face to face with Victoria Claudel. The shock was so great that she almost dropped the treasure-box. But Victoria, who was bidding an affectionate farewell to a girl friend, merely turned her back and proceeded with her conversation.

Philippa had to pass them to reach her number, and a dull fear crossed her heart as if she had neared something baneful. Again her aunt's

words rang in her ears: "Drop that scallawag Pole if you want to save yourself!"

She was on the brink of a nervous collapse, but blind to her danger. An open door attracted her attention. Over it was the number 148. The light from the port-hole showed the simple, yet luxurious cabin furnishings. On the sofa bunk, with her back to the light, sat a tall woman, wearing a modish, forward-tilted hat and a tan ulster, and holding loosely in her lap a bunch of red carnations.

Philippa mustered her courage, and assumed the manner of an old acquaintance.

"I have come to wish you a pleasant trip, Madame Tollé, and to bring you some books to lighten your journey." She spoke in French, with an affected ease, but in spite of herself her voice was thin, excited, and broken.

The woman rose gracefully, and greeted her.

"You are very good," she said; and she closed the cabin door sharply.

Philippa, with a sigh of relief, deposited her burden on the sofa, and stood awkwardly.

"So," the woman continued, with a strange

tone of irony and bitterness, placing herself in front of the door. "So you are the creature who has taken his fancy now, are you? Let me ask you this, madame, do you think I have risked my life and freedom for him, that he may spend his love on such as you, *hein?* It is to the death between us, I warn you. Not yet, for we are not in a position, but later — later!"

"Let me pass!" Philippa demanded, hysterically, frightened out of her self-control. "I have done my duty — let me go! I don't know you, and I don't understand."

The Frenchwoman laughed, jeeringly.

"Oh, no. How should you understand!"

A sound of voices in the corridor made her lower her tone. "Oh, no. But wait, wait till we are out of the woods; then come to France if you dare, and see what the end will be."

Philippa's nerves were giving way. She felt ill and dizzy; but her glance fell on the call-bell, and her face lighted up.

"I shall ring," she said, with all the dignity she could muster.

Madame Tollé caught her hand just as the

door she had defended swung open. In the narrow passage stood two men, their eyes fastened on the occupants of 148, and Philippa, seeing relief in their presence, sprang forward.

Her antagonist turned quickly, and caught sight of the faces before her. The change that came over her was terrible. She seemed to shrink as in the fire of a furnace. She backed away slowly, till her foot caught on the protruding corner of her bag. She stumbled against the wash-stand and clung to it for support.

Philippa, having no key to the situation, looked astonishment not unmixed with relief. She hurried across the raised threshold, trembling and pale.

"That woman is mad!" she said, brokenly.

One of the men stepped to her side and caught her with a detaining hand.

"You cannot go, madame — pardon me. You had better say nothing," he added, in a lower tone. "Anything you might say would be used against you."

"What do you mean?" Philippa demanded, fiercely.

But there was no leisure for questions or answers.

A smothered exclamation sounded from within, a quick rush, and through the open door they saw the other man close with the tall figure of the woman. Her hand was slowly forced above her head. In it she held a small revolver. The fingers clinched, there was a sharp report, a whiff of smoke — a hole in the ceiling.

Philippa moved as if to run out. The grip on her arm was tightened.

Down the main corridor a confusion of hastening feet and frightened voices announced the panic caused by the shot. She saw the steel handcuffs slip over the helpless hands of Madame Tollé. A third man slipped by them and quickly gathered up the scattered baggage, the despatch-box, and two hand-bags. In another instant they were surrounded by anxious, inquiring faces. She was being conducted to the main corridor; presently they would be in the saloon.

Philippa staggered and gasped.

"Brace up," said her captor, not unkindly. "I'll take you through as if you had nothing to

do with it. You're not an old hand." He looked at her admiringly. "Bad company, my girl, bad company."

Her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. There in the crowd stood Victoria, looking at her. She tried to raise her head and walk haughtily by, but she could not. Her eyes would fix themselves on the face of her former friend. She saw an expression of the utmost amazement cross Victoria's face, saw those fine, fearless gray eyes travel back to her with sudden comprehension.

Victoria slipped from her place with a matter-of-fact air, and quietly joined her.

"Permit me to accompany this lady," she said, leaning across and addressing the detective in a low voice. "There is some mistake."

He looked at her sharply, and nodded.

"Every one is leaving the ship," she continued, gently, in Philippa's ear. "Lower your veil, walk easily, and nobody will guess — talk to me; seem interested."

Philippa turned her tortured eyes to Victoria, but her paralyzed tongue could form no sound.

They reached the gangplank and the dock, con-

scious that the attention of the crowd was centred on the figures that followed them. There was a confused murmur of voices and exclamations.

"Turn round and look as if you, too, were interested," commanded Victoria, and the helpless Philippa obeyed.

"This way," directed their conductor, indicating a waiting cab. "We have two, for we expected to land the gentleman himself — not this lady, though. The whole affair is a pretty rum go."

"I'm coming with you," Victoria observed, determinedly. "This lady can prove her innocence, I am sure. And she should be protected."

Without waiting for consent or refusal, she entered the cab and assisted Philippa, who was spent and trembling.

The detective let down the little seat in front of them, slammed the door, and the cab lurched forward toward the police-station.

CHAPTER VII.

FOR some time Philippa, utterly dazed, lay back among the cushions, gazing vacantly into the face of her captor, who sat opposite, a square-headed man, with beady eyes and a thin, determined mouth, while Victoria sat and wondered ruefully at her own quixotism. She had no cause to love Philippa; but she had obeyed the impulse of class. She had seen one of her own world suddenly caught in this equivocal net, and had turned to help, forgetting for the moment her wrongs at the hands of this woman.

Sharply Philippa straightened herself, and as if her stolen voice had suddenly been returned to her, burst out: "What do you mean? How dare you arrest me? What have I done? It's wicked — it's cruel! Tell me this instant!"

"Now, lady," the detective said, soothingly, "don't you get riled; just you be quiet. You're

not used to this sort of thing, I know, and I tell you the best thing to do is to say nothing at all; it's safest."

"But what for — what for? It's some horrid plot — it's your doing," she cried, suddenly opening fire on Victoria. "It's you — you informed on him — you did! And now he'll be sent to Russia or Siberia! And all because he wanted to help a poor, down-trodden people!"

"I don't know what you are talking about!" said Victoria, angrily. "I saw you in distress, and I came to shield you from the crowd. As to informing, I told you the whole story, and that I had gone to the French consul. I suppose this had something to do with Valdeck?" she added, addressing the detective.

"Yes, mum," he nodded, "and from what I heard you say, I take you to be the lady who gave the clew. Did you recognize the woman — the other woman?"

Victoria shook her head. "I didn't see her," she answered. "Who is she?"

He looked at her sagely. "Big game," he said, "and came mighty near giving us the slip. The

next thing is to make her tell where the gent is. Here we are, ladies — not far to go. Now, my girl, you be careful how you talk. I know you — you all get hysterical the first time you're caught, but just you hang on to yourself."

The cab stopped short, and the door was opened by a police sergeant, who stood aside as the trio descended from the vehicle to the stone-paved court, surrounded by official-looking buildings. The hack turned and departed, making room for the second cab, from which Madame Tollé and her two companions emerged.

The whole party filed into the large, bare waiting-room, lighted by a gray-white shine of daylight filtered through pebbled glass. An immense desk similar to those used in hotels filled one side of the place; a telephone, a huge metal safe, still suggestive of a cheap hostelry, and wooden benches made up the furniture. Behind the desk a police captain stood twirling his mustache.

As the party entered, he reached for a huge ledger, and opening it, gave it a twist toward the arrivals, but on recognizing the detectives, he nodded, and closed the register with a bang.

His glance fell admiringly upon the three women, of whom only Victoria was unveiled.

The detectives advanced to the captain, and a low-voiced conversation ensued, in which the words "small book," and "French consul" were repeated at intervals.

Philippa shivered as with cold, and leaned against the desk helplessly. Victoria bent toward her, touched by her misery. "Ask for a lawyer," she suggested, softly. "You have a right to that, I know."

"Here, you!" interrupted the captain, "no whispering with the prisoner. Say, Pollock, who's that?"

"Miss Claudel, who gave the information to the consul — so she said. It seems she knows the other lady who brought the box."

"Hum," said the captain, "I suppose we had better do a bit of telephoning here. Mulligan, ring up the consulate."

"I want a lawyer," begged Philippa, timidly.

"Do, eh? Well, I suppose you can have one. Who?"

She hesitated a moment, vainly trying to col-

lect her scattered memory. "Mr. Pendle, 120A Broadway — Pendle & Brown. They are my aunt's attorneys."

"Your name?" demanded the officer.

"Philippa Clensdale Ford, of —— Madison Avenue."

"Very well. Now we will see what we have here."

The two hand-bags and the iron despatch-box were laid on the table, and after a few attempts the lock of the latter was forced, and the lid thrown back, revealing a layer of white cotton.

"Inventory," ordered the captain.

The sergeant prepared to note the contents. There was a moment's tense silence as the concealing batting was removed, revealing a number of tiny packages wrapped in tissue-paper. The clumsy, hairy fingers of the officer unfolded one picked up at random. There was a glitter, a sparkle, and a flash as the contents lay bare to the light — ten or more diamonds of various sizes.

A gasp from Philippa was the only sound that greeted the find.

"First package, twelve diamonds; second package, six small emeralds; third, two large diamonds; fourth, handful of small stones; fifth, four rubies, one cat's-eye; sixth, eight-strand pearl and diamond collar; seventh, pearl rope, very large; eighth, large yellow diamond; two packets colored pearls, three pink, two brown, one large black, pierced."

There was absolute quiet as the heaps increased, sparkling as they lay on their opened wrappers.

Philippa, her eyes dilated, breathed hard in terror as the jewels accumulated. She was staggered by the shock of surprise. All this had been left in her charge; she had slept in her violet-hung bed above all this wealth, believing it but a few paltry hundreds to be turned over to a deserving charity. What did it all mean? Could it be that Valdeck — But no! impossible! These were doubtless the gifts of wealthy sympathizers.

The merciless counting went on. Would they never come to an end? At last an exclamation from the imperturbable sergeant voiced the feelings of all, as he rolled in his palm a huge brown diamond and two solitaires of great size and bril-

liancy. "So help me, Mulligan!" he exclaimed, "if this ain't the swag of them New Orleans robberies that we had word of last month. This here brown shiner is the 'Longosini' one. Where's that reward-list? On the board yonder."

Mulligan went to the large blackboard at the further end of the room, whereon were pasted announcements of rewards for the capture of criminals. "Yes, sor," he answered, from across the room, "it's themselves! 'Brown diamond, five carats, two white and one blue, three and a half, three, and four carats respectively.' Say, Pollock, you've made the haul this time, and no mistake!"

"Here's the blue one," broke in the captain, as he held up a jewel between his thumb and forefinger. "Well, of all the surprises! No bail for this, I guess, — no, sir!"

"But," cried Victoria, "you can't keep Miss Ford here. Put her under surveillance if you must, — but no, you can't! Philippa, Commissioner Holes is one of your aunt's friends — have him called up; he can do more for you here than any one else."

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Philippa, "you must let me go! Yes, telephone to Commissioner Holes; tell him to come himself and release me. Oh, I don't know what I shall do!"

"Whew!" whistled the sergeant, softly; "Commissioner Holes, is it? Well, well, now! But, Miss Ford, how did you come by these beauties? Maybe ye can give us a satisfactory explanation?"

"I can, — oh, I can!" Philippa exclaimed, pale with excitement. "Mr. Valdeck told me he was the head of the Polish Educational Society, and was collecting funds for the cause. He said he was watched by Russian spies and couldn't send the money on without being suspected and having everything seized and confiscated when it reached the other side — and of course I believed it all; indeed, I did!"

"Look at that, now," Mulligan nodded. "Russian spies, is it? Sure, lady, it's the likes of you that makes the life easy for scamps and rogues. And what is the grand American police for? Sure, we haven't no use for nary a foreign spy."

"Shut up!" commanded the captain. "Miss Ford, have you anything to prove your statement?"

Philippa dragged at the bosom of her dress; tremblingly she undid the buttons and drew forth two crumpled notes. "There! there!" she cried, "read them. See what he says himself!"

The captain smoothed the rumpled sheets, and read aloud.

There was a pause, and then Philippa wished she had died before she had given up the letters. As the words of endearment spoken in the harsh, mechanical voice of the captain filled the police-station, a burning, writhing shame overpowered her. She had forgotten, in her anxiety to clear herself, the terms of the letters. She clung to the desk, feeling Victoria's honest gray eyes on her burning with indignation. Oh, that Victoria, of all people, should see her in this state!

As the last sentence echoed into silence, Madame Tollé, who up to this moment had stood silent, uttered a sharp cry like a hurt animal as she recognized the handwriting. Then she burst into a torrent of French abuse that made the

walls of the station-house shiver, used as they were to ungentle language.

But Philippa was unconscious of this. All she realized was Victoria — Victoria, who turned and faced her with clenched hands and white face. She was speaking slowly and with terrible scorn: "And you were engaged to Morton — you! I thought there might have been some mistake about that private-room dinner-party; I thought you might explain, but we hardly need go further!" She broke off and turned her back; without another word she moved toward the door.

"Hold on! Miss Claudel, we want you, please. The consul will be here presently, and then we'll need your services. Mulligan, search the bags, and then take the French woman to the matron and have her go over her. But first, come here."

Madame Tollé was led forward. "Your name?" asked the captain. There was no answer. The detective spoke: "She is Marie Françoise Ducas," he said. "Here is her photograph." He laid it on the desk.

"Nativity?"

"Paris," answered the detective, as the woman

maintained her stubborn silence, now and again darting venomous glances at Philippa through her heavy veil.

"Occupation?"

"She is a pal of Valdeck's, alias Kelsoff, alias O'Farrell."

"Lift that veil," commanded the officer.

The blue tissue was raised, revealing a sharp, not unhandsome face, on which the traces of a delicate make-up were apparent, contrasting with her present pallor.

Victoria started, looked, and looked again. "Why," she cried, "I know her! That is the maid, Madame Château-Lamion's maid."

The woman turned on her an instant's searching glance; then, in spite of herself, recognition dawned in her face. "*Connais pas,*" she said, shortly, with a shrug of her shoulders.

"You could swear to this?" the captain asked, slowly, of Victoria, who answered without hesitation:

"Yes, I will swear to it. I recall her perfectly."

"That's the consul's racket," Mulligan sug-

gested. "We're in for this New Orleans business. Glory be to the saints, but she's a thorough one!" And he looked admiringly at the Frenchwoman.

Meanwhile, communications were pouring in by telephone. The consul was out, but would be notified as soon as possible; Mr. Pendle would come at once; Mrs. Ford was absent.

"Gentlemen," said Victoria, "if you have no further need of me, I will go."

"Your name first, please, in full, and your residence. For sure you'll be wanted as a witness, and to identify the lady's maid again. Then ye can go, and many thanks for your trouble."

Victoria gave her name and address without casting a glance toward Philippa, too outraged to show any sympathy. The sergeant accompanied her to the door, but as it closed she heard the order, "Take 'em to the matron."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE morning of the same day that witnessed the incarceration of Philippa, Morton rose after a sleepless and tormented night and made his resolve: this matter had to be cleared up. When his fiancée had been removed to her room and the flurried maid had brought him the message that "mademoiselle was recovering, but begged to be excused," he had betaken himself to his rooms in a high state of excitement. Above all else, he was enraged at Mrs. Durham, the woman who had dared to fling such cowardly accusations at the most saintly girl on earth. As he paced the floor he formed his determinations. Philippa must not be drawn into this wretched business. He would conduct it for her; it was his place and privilege, and he would see who should write retractions or apologies, Philippa or Mrs. Durham. In fancy he hounded the malicious author-

ess to her lair, delivered an oration on feminine weakness, folly, and venom, and departed only to place in the hands of his wronged angel the document wrung from her accuser.

But Victoria — alas, Victoria! His old friendship and loyalty pleaded for her. How could he have been so mistaken? To do him justice, had he not been love-mad he never would have owned a doubt of her. But so is man constituted that one touch of passion weakens his hold on his perceptions, even his certain knowledge. He would have fought to the last ditch for her against all odds, save yellow-haired Philippa with the violet eyes. But Fate had placed before him just that one antagonist, and his friendship failed, — not without pain, not without hurt to his whole nature. But he could not doubt his love.

Valdeck and his equivocal words rose before him — Valdeck, the criminal! But perhaps, after all, that charge was groundless; Philippa had declared that Victoria had a malicious vengeance to satisfy in her statement of the case.

At last, however, Morton's instincts refused to be longer suppressed. Whatever Valdeck's re-

lations to Victoria might be, Morton was forced to confess that he believed her story; the man was undoubtedly the social vampire she pictured. Had he not felt it from the first, and begged his darling to shun the contaminating companionship? It was only Philippa's innocence and lack of knowledge of things worldly that had led her to tolerate the impostor! Then why believe the villain's testimony against Victoria? Morton's saner self demanded. Perhaps after all the blame lay with the Hungarian alone. Philippa had undoubtedly lent too ready an ear to the man's accusations, brought solely to throw discredit on Victoria's hitherto unimpeached word, — women were notoriously uncharitable towards each other. His intuition told him he was near the truth now. He might even clear Victoria's skirts from blame, with no graver charge against Philippa than a too-great willingness to listen and believe evil of her neighbors. Again and again he went over the ground, gaining greater faith in his surmises. He forgot his dinner, smoked himself into a thoroughly nervous condition, and passed a night of wakefulness and speculation.

With the morning came action. First he must see Mrs. Durham, and secure a written retraction of her accusation against Philippa; then he would sift the matter down to the last grain of fact, exonerate Victoria, and bring Valdeck to his much-needed punishment.

As early as he decently could, Morton telephoned to Mrs. Durham, and was promptly answered.

His anger flamed up once more as he sat in the stuffy booth and heard over the connecting wire the well-modulated tones of her voice.

"This is Mr. Conway," he answered her first question. "Can you make it convenient to see me this morning?" His tone was cold, and boded no mercy.

To his surprise the answer came fearlessly, and it was even more belligerent and icy than his own. "Certainly; I was expecting you. If you will come for me at once, you will find me at breakfast in the restaurant. We can go into the matter at once."

Her readiness staggered him; he had expected

equivocation and delay; this businesslike alertness was unsettling.

"In half an hour, then?" he inquired, with a new note of anxiety in his voice.

"The sooner the better," came the unwavering reply. And he hung up the receiver with a sensation of dread.

How could she be so sure of herself? How dared she face him with her trumped-up story? Surely there must be some appearance, some foundation — perfectly innocent — but making misinterpretation possible.

No! He recalled vividly Philippa's upturned, beseeching eyes, and her tearful, childish accent as she had turned to him. "Morton, if you love me, don't give them the satisfaction of listening. You know it isn't true!"

Of course he knew it wasn't true, poor, bewildered little girl! Feeling again all his eager animosity, he went out and called a passing hansom.

As he drove up Fifth Avenue, he hardened his heart and steeled his nerves. This clashing of feminine weapons and armor was new and

harassing. How was one to tell a lady, young, pretty, and bewitchingly gowned, just what a mean, wretched example of humanity she really was! Morton would vastly have preferred a dozen tigers or as many famished duns. But he buckled on his mail of insensibility and justice, and relentlessly proceeded.

As they drew up before the vast, yellow side of the studio building, he collected himself and assumed a formally polite manner, calculated to strike terror into any less businesslike and well-administered citadel than Mrs. Durham's heart.

As he entered the restaurant, the lady rose to meet him, brisk, frank, and energetic.

"Good morning, Mr. Conway. Of course you've been vastly annoyed. I quite understand. And the sooner it's over, the better. Isn't that so?"

He noted with annoyance that she seemed even fresher, younger, more self-possessed, and more beautifully tailored than ever.

"You understand the nature of my visit, then?" he inquired, coldly.

"Oh, dear, yes. You want me to explain what

I meant. Dare I produce my informant? — and all the rest of it. My dear man, I should not have made that assertion had I not been perfectly prepared to do so. You have a cab? Good! It will save time, and I must be back by twelve. My typewriter, you know." She smiled sweetly, and preceded him into the hall.

He assisted her into the hansom and took his seat. "Where to?" he asked, his curiosity piercing his indifferent manner.

"To your uncle Morris Courncey's office."

Morton gave the address in bewilderment.

"I'll tell you a few things about this, if you like," said Mrs. Durham, leaning back quite at her ease, and not in the least flustered. "Your good old relative was a great friend of Victoria's parents, you see, and some of this nasty gossip concerning the daughter reached his ears. Of course, he made up his mind to discover who had originated the said slander. He came to me — we were old pals, too, as it happened, and he likewise knew me to be a great admirer and an unswerving friend of Victoria's." There was the

least suspicion of emphasis marking the "unswerving," and Morton winced.

"He asked me to whom Victoria was indebted for these fascinating little innuendoes and open remarks, and I told him just what every one else has, namely, that Victoria's dear friend, Miss Ford, was at the bottom of it all. 'What!' exclaimed old Morris, 'Philippa Ford? Why, she wouldn't dare! I saw her myself go up-stairs with that Valdeck in Gagano's restaurant, where no decent woman ever goes! She couldn't afford to speak ill of any one!' 'Well,' I answered, 'she has.' 'Then,' said your uncle Morris, 'I'll be hanged if I don't prove she isn't to be believed!'"

Morton swung round in his seat as if he had been hit, and faced his companion, white to the lips.

"Kindly remember I am engaged to Miss Ford," he said, slowly, dizzied with indignation.

Mrs. Durham sighed. "I'm trying to prepare you for what you are bound to get from Courncey, who has, I have learned, a very just perception of things, and a wonderfully fine vocabulary with which to clothe it. To continue, I begged him to

do nothing till I saw him again. I wanted to think things over and make the most of the information when the time came. That was yesterday morning, and the time came in the afternoon."

"Mr. Courncey is mistaken; a fancied resemblance," he answered, doggedly.

"Not at all; but I will let him speak for himself. In the meantime, I am honestly sorry for you, though I've no patience with any one claiming even ordinary common sense who pins his faith on a woman of Miss Ford's stamp when he has the friendship of such a personality as Victoria. You deserve — well, I don't know that my imagination can picture anything quite bad enough. She's worth ten dozen such as you! And all the golden-haired Philippas that ever were born wouldn't make a showing that Vic couldn't overturn with her little finger. Ouf! I'm getting angry. Let's be quiet."

"I think it would be in better taste," Morton murmured, under his breath.

Mrs. Durham leaned back, watching the endless procession of city blocks and the ceaseless, hurry-

ing procession that crowded the sidewalk and congested the thoroughfares.

They reached the region of shops, and drove down on Broadway, where the buildings grew taller, and the gilt wholesale signs more aggressive. Noise and rumble all about them, yet the two sat enveloped in silence, threading their way amid the banging, pounding cable-cars, skimming by other hurrying hansoms, skilfully avoiding the heavy, jarring wheels of laden trucks.

They at last drew up before the towering front of a huge office hive, from which, busy as bees, in and out, rushed anxious business men. Elevators sped up and down with lightning swiftness; everywhere was slippery marble and wrought metal, things designed for cleanliness, durability, and hard usage, yet ornate. A strange outgrowth of luxury and utility pushed to their extreme.

As if in a dream, they were caught in the rush, and snapped into one of the elevators. Instantly they shot upward, stopping with disturbing jerks at various landings. At the ninth floor they

stepped out, and walked down the marble corridor.

Before the office sign of Courncey & Hall they paused. Mechanically Morton opened the door, and his commanding companion swept by him. With a regal nod to the clerk who advanced to meet them, she handed her card with a request for instant admittance to the senior partner's private office. The sound of her voice was apparently an "Open Sesame," for the ground-glass door at the upper end of the room was opened abruptly by a red-faced little man, who rushed down on her after the manner of an affectionate bulldog, whose exuberant greeting might well be mistaken by the uninitiated for a threatening advance.

"So it's you, is it? Come in, come in, come in!"

He fired the words with inconceivable rapidity, as he wrung first Mrs. Durham's hand, and then his nephew's somewhat reluctant palm.

They filed into the sanctum, and the little millionaire banged the door smartly.

"Sit down, sit down, sit down!" he volleyed. "Don't mind me if I tramp about — nervous,

you know, nervous! I suppose you brought Morton down to hear what I have to say? Glad of it, glad of it." He paused, fixed his piercing black eyes on Morton.

Mrs. Durham had seated herself calmly. But Morton remained erect, towering above his rapid-firing uncle by a full head and a half.

"You're not engaged to her, are you?" Courncey demanded, suddenly suspicious. "I heard rumors, you know — rumors. But I denied them, of course. Still, before we go any further: Are you here as Victoria's friend to run down that cowardly lie, or are you trying to clear that snivelling little cat, Philippa Ford?"

"Uncle Morris," he answered, simply, "I am engaged to Miss Ford, but" — and the faintest hesitation trembled in his words — "I want to know the truth. Mrs. Durham has accused the young lady of dining in a notorious restaurant with a — well, in questionable company, while she was professing her love for me, and had been engaged only a few days. And Miss Ford positively denies this."

"But she did — she did!" cried the little man.

Morton raised his hand deprecatingly. "That has to be proved. As for these stories, I am only too anxious to clear Victoria — you know how fond I am, and always have been, of her. I am convinced that this man Valdeck has put these lies in circulation to shield himself. Perhaps Miss Ford may have repeated them, for which I should be heartily sorry; but, if so, it was in the belief that she was speaking the truth."

Mr. Courncey fairly danced in his desire to break this torrent of speech and get in his own crowding words. "Fiddlesticks! Bosh!" he roared, finally. "Miserable little minx, glad enough she was to blacken a girl like Victoria Claudel! I have learned — and it hasn't been from Mrs. Durham, either —" He turned as he spoke, indicating with a quick gesture the chair near the door. It was empty.

The two men looked startled for a moment, then relieved. With rare tact the lady had removed her restraining presence.

Courncey bubbled with appreciation. "And now, thank God! I can swear all I please. As I said, I have heard from many sources that the

Ford girl has been doing her level best to ruin Victoria's reputation! Now answer me: didn't she shake even your confidence?"

Morton flushed to the roots of his hair, and his uncle, requiring no further answer, chuckled angrily.

"Of course she did, confound her! And let me tell you I saw her — saw her myself, going into Gagano's. I was sitting in the restaurant facing the door that opens into the hall leading to the private rooms up-stairs. They came in about half-past seven. I can describe every rag she wore: a black velvet dress and a sable cape, and a black hat with feathers on it. She glanced into the room. I could see the annoyance on her face when she discovered that the door was open, but somehow she didn't recognize me. With her was that man Valdeck, and I'll bet my last share in the 'Consolidated' he's a bad egg, in spite of the fuss these women make over him. Who in thunder is he? And where did he come from? Confound him!"

"I must believe you mistaken," Morton ob-

jected, but the old resolution was gone from his manner.

"Mistaken, mistaken! Damme, sir, I'm not mistaken! Unless she takes back every word she has said about the daughter of my old friend — a girl who hasn't a father of her own to help her — if she doesn't, I say, I'll make what I saw public! Fanshaw was with me, and saw her, too, and can corroborate it! I guess the three of us can prove what we say, and I'll bet Miss Philippa won't be able to produce an alibi!"

"Three?" was all Morton could say, for his tongue thickened and his eyes were dim.

"The waiter, you blockhead, the waiter!" roared Courncey. "After Mrs. Durham exploded her bomb, she went down and interviewed him. Very clever woman, that, very clever! Ought to have been a man, a business man. Clear head, clear eye, no fluster, no brag. Anyway, she argued that one or the other of them would see the danger and shut the waiter up. So she went first. Good move, very! But, unfortunately, the fellow wouldn't say much."

The young man drew himself up to his full

height, scorn and agony at work on his handsome face.

"Pretty game, isn't it, trying to bribe servants? And, pray, what should a waiter of Gagano's know of Miss Ford? I should count his identification mere perjury!"

"Not a bit of it, not a bit of it! As it happens, this one has worked at Sherry's and Delmonico's. Man's been sick — just out of hospital. Took Gagano's job *pro tem.* But it seems it's professional etiquette with them to keep mum — doctors, priests, and waiters, same lodge."

Morton sat down miserably. His world was spinning about him. If only Philippa had not looked him in the face with those angelic eyes, and denied. If only she had not held to her accusation of Victoria, and made herself out such a supremely superior being. If only she had left one loophole for her own shortcomings. The escapade he would have forgiven — what girl does not need forgiveness for some daredevil, foolish action sometime in her life? Who was he to blame her?

His eyes burned and his mouth twitched as his

perfect trust of Philippa crumbled and fell from him.

He was roused by the sound of Mrs. Durham's voice, and looking up, noticed her slim, flat shoulders and the graceful sweep of her skirts. She had entered and was talking to Courncey with her back toward him. He was glad of that; he could not bear that she should see his face.

Rising quickly, he walked to the window and stood looking down on the crowded streets below, over which, antlike, men and women swarmed and crawled. He almost wished himself one of those silent, undisturbed sleepers down in Trinity churchyard, where the headstones protruded, black with damp, from the dark brown mold spotted over with rotten, porous snow. He pulled himself together, and turned again to the room. Mrs. Durham's face was toward him now, and he heard her voice, modulated to not ungentle tones. He did not catch her words. He was conscious only of one decision. For sake of what had been, he would shield Philippa! for the sake of his own illusion — the illusion, not the reality!

"You need give no further proof, if you have any," he said. "I know Uncle Morris and Fanshaw too well."

"You called me to account," Mrs. Durham went on. "I have made good my statements. Now let me appeal to you. You have lost Philippa, do you want to lose Victoria, too? Help us to clear up this horrid slander! I think if we all use our personal influence, we can turn the cogs of this slow, legal machinery with much greater speed. We can have a closer watch put upon Valdeck, and employ our own detective, if necessary. Now, we've worked it out this way — your uncle and I. We think that Valdeck has something vital on foot now, and so could not change his plans. He tried to countermine Victoria when he saw that she recognized him, solely to gain time. It was playing a dangerous game, so the time needed must have been only comparatively short, and the stake large. Now it's three weeks since information was laid against him. Things must be coming to a head, and he must not give us the slip. You understand?"

"Well put, very well put!" Mr. Courncey ex-

claimed, quickly. "Good statement of the case. Now, Morton, I can see that since Miss Ford's name has been connected with yours, you want to protect her, though she don't deserve it — wretched little yellow cat!"

"Yes," Morton nodded, gravely. "I would like to save her, if it's possible."

"If she takes it all back about Victoria —"

"Publicly," cut in Mrs. Durham.

"Of course, of course!" bellowed Courncey. "Whoever thought of anything else?"

"I fancy she will do that, but we mustn't make it too difficult — she's proud —"

"Vain!" sniffed Mrs. Durham.

Morton took no notice. "Let us keep all this quite to ourselves; don't let a word of it get out to the newspapers, or in common talk. Miss Ford shall own herself mistaken, and I have no doubt she will give Valdeck as the authority for her former assertions. Then we can push him to the wall all the easier, and we need have no mercy!"

There was a grimness in the click of his jaw as he shut his teeth that boded ill for the suave

foreigner if ever he should come within reach of Morton's long, powerful arm.

"We may count on you, then?" said Mrs. Durham. "I think, since of course you must see Miss Ford, that you might explain matters better than I can."

"I would rather you saw her yourself," he said, dully, "or, better still, have a talk with her aunt."

"Very well," she assented. "Morris, I think we will leave you. Sorry to have made this little scene in your office, but I know you are anxious for your old friend Claudel's sake, and his daughter's, too."

"Oh, it'll turn out all right, all right!" jerked Courncey. "You've been a trump, a trump, madam! And, damme, if I ever get into trouble, I'll come to you." The little man wrung her hand once more, then lifted his snapping, black eyes, from which all the hardness had vanished, to the troubled face of his nephew.

"You're hit hard," he said, gravely, "and I'm sorry; but, my boy, better find these things out before marriage than afterward. That girl's a

bad lot, for all her yellow hair and baby eyes. She's rotten to the core — it's inherited, it's natural, and it's cultivated. I know her! Have the courage to break your engagement — don't be a fool, and let her make you believe you're tied. You've got to do the square thing — not the soft thing, mind you, but the square thing — by yourself, first, and before all. Good-bye, good-bye!"

Once more Morton found himself in the elevator, being dropped down-stairs at a sickening pace, and presently he was out in the street again.

"If you don't mind, Mrs. Durham," he heard himself saying, "I'll put you into a cab. I need exercise and I want to think, so I'd better walk up."

"Of course," she said, cheerily. "Don't mind me in the least. Just put me aboard a hansom." She looked up at him with such a light of sweetness in her face that in spite of his former antagonism his heart warmed toward her.

She held out her hand. "You'll believe me, won't you? It's only out of my love for Victoria that I'm pushing this thing so far. I don't usually make it my business to hound any woman down.

I've got a theory that, after all, a woman pays such a fearful price for everything in life that we must consider she's always on the short side of the balance-sheet, and so be extra generous and attend to our own business. And I'm really not such a frightfully meddlesome old body."

He almost smiled at her earnestness, as he gave her his hand and she lightly settled herself in a cab.

"Good-bye," she called.

He raised his hat as the hansom turned and began its zigzag journey northward. Then, plunging into the crowd, he walked on mechanically.

Now it chanced that Victoria, hot and angry from the police-station episode, and Morton, sore and miserable from his interview, both started to walk off their troubles. Together they had contracted the habit. From childhood up they were wont to wear out their griefs and rages in company, walking at a furious gait, sometimes for hours in unbroken silence, till the burdened one would be moved to confidences, and then, the

trouble past, they would saunter comfortably home.

In this case Victoria had the start and was further up-town, but Morton's huge stride carried him forward at greater speed than Victoria's steady swing.

Now, if A starts from C, walking at the rate of a hundred and twenty miles an hour, and B starts from D, walking at the rate of a hundred and eighty miles an hour, how long will it take B to overtake A?

The result occurred in the neighborhood of Thirty-Second Street and Eighth Avenue. By a common impulse they had made for that region. There they had formerly indulged their mutual peripatetic propensities. And the neighborhood being unfrequented, a higher steam-pressure and a more regular course could be assured.

It suddenly dawned on Morton that the back of the girl walking a block or so directly in front of him was strangely familiar: that strong stride, that broad-shouldered, erect carriage, and — completing and convincing detail — the heavy hair that was struggling to let itself down. That

hair bristled with helpless pins, and the constant gesture by which she absent-mindedly strove to push them in brought up a thousand affectionate memories.

Involuntarily he quickened his pace, closing the distance between them till only a foot or so intervened.

"Tory," he called, "hold on; wait for me."

The girl turned abruptly, her face all stretched to speak, but she looked in his face for an instant, and moved on in silence, joining her step with his.

The years slipped by as if by a miracle; they were boy and girl again, walking off a rage in the old way.

The ugly brick avenue, with its withered shops and shabby boarding-houses, took on a beautiful, friendly familiarity; every iron grating had its little history, every show-window its episode. Even the changes consequent upon the lapse of time served to recall the houses that had vanished.

Gradually the old spirit took hold of them; their recent troubles and estrangement fell away.

"THE GIRL TURNED ABRUPTLY."

Philippa was a name — no more: Valdeck a nightmare! And as for the worthless love that had occupied his heart, Morton awoke with a start to find it utterly gone — the rainbow bubble of his senses had been dispelled. He saw clearly now, saw through the glamour to the utter sham of it, saw the narrow, calculating mind, the small, mean soul, and the overwhelming vanity that swathed Philippa from top to toe in a garment of hypocrisy — saw, and did not care! His grief had disappeared with the renewal of his mental vision. Why should he regret where there was nothing worthy of regret? He could only curse himself for a fool, and wonder that he had ever owned a doubt, or that his loyal friendship should have failed the girl beside him — his "little twin" of the old days, and always.

Victoria was busy with her own thoughts, but happy in the regained companionship of her chum. She felt instinctively the chrysalis breaking in his mind, and the beautiful butterfly of their mutual understanding evolving itself more splendid than the rudimentary, though beloved, little grub of their childish affection.

Within view of the Park entrance, they came to a little restaurant often frequented in former years.

"Let's go in and eat *caviare,*" she suggested, breaking the silence.

"Let's," he answered. "Let's go in and eat *caviare* and drink *Würzburger,* and talk it all over, just as we used to!"

CHAPTER IX.

IN the French quarter, west of Sixth Avenue and well down Twenty-sixth Street, stands a little hotel and restaurant unknown to fame as *La belle Nivernaise*. It is dingy, gray with age and smoke, and the aroma of many savory dinners floats perceptibly on the air. One huge window fronts the street, adorned by a flowery balcony without, and clean white curtains within, through which may be divined, rather than seen, dozens of small tables, each bearing its white cloth, its half-yard of bread, its tapering celery-glass of *graccinni* (in deference to the Italian *habitués*), and wonderfully folded napkins foliating from portly and unbreakable goblets. The narrow steps are steep and few that lead to the door on the left of the window, and above the hospitable entrance swings a weather-beaten sign, — a rain-washed damsel, pointing with a grimacing smile to a much

dimmed tricolor. The hallway within is not spacious, and the stair leading to the floor above is inclined at the angle of Jacob's-ladder, and covered by a frayed ingrain carpet of uncertain color. On the second story, a hallway, dark as Erebus, gives access to the rooms of the *locataires*. There are four such rooms on the side and one at the end, offering the same general aspect — dark papers of the fashion of thirty years ago, walnut furniture, iron bedsteads, each boasting two fat eider-down pillows, covered with turkey red and further decorated with squares of Nottingham lace. The black-framed mirrors that hang above each wash-stand present a varied assortment of discolorations. To contemplate one's self therein is by no means a tribute to vanity; on the contrary, it is conducive to serious thoughts upon the precariousness of human existence, so green, distorted, and scarred is the reflection that meets the eye. The gas-brackets, protruding aggressively, are so many dark and shapely hands of bronze, emerging from frilled bronze cuffs, and uplifting tiny torches of the same metal, upon which bulge engraved globes of a

"hunted deer pattern." The accommodations of *La belle Nivernaise* are not palatial.

In the second room to the right, at the top of the landing, a new *locataire* had just moved in. As Gustave, the waiter, told Hortense, "la dame au douze" was of a reticence of a silenceness not to be believed! But she had insisted upon knowing who her neighbors were — the "monsieur du quatorze" and "les petites sœurs du dix!"

"She had pulled at the communicating doors, acted very strangely, and given him a piece of fifty cents for carrying up her hand-bags — and they of a lightness!"

"Was the monsieur du quatorze in his room?" Hortense inquired.

But Gustave did not know — he thought not. A bang at the hall door brought them both to the curtain at the end of the passage. Ah, to be sure, the gentleman himself — a nice gentleman, but with habits extraordinary. For the little he used his room he might as well have no room at all. For days at a time he never showed up. A "commis traveller," of course.

But he was not gay and happy as are the voyageurs, and then, besides, he had no sample-trunk.

Gustave chucked Hortense under her dimpled chin with a superior air. "And dost thou not know, grosse bête, that he is agent for automobiles? — in a sample-trunk! — Viola! that was droll!"

"Tiens!" cried Hortense, "there is the patronesse who rings!" and she flew to the summons of Madame Guisard, formerly *la belle Nivernaise,* now grown fat beyond belief, red-faced and choleric.

The "monsieur du quatorze" tramped on upstairs, unlocked his door, entered, and slipped the bolt. Then he threw his soft hat upon the bed, slipped angrily out of his overcoat, flung himself upon the frowzy satin rocker, and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands. His face was white and pinched, and his eyes discolored and miserable, for the "gentleman of travel with the habits extraordinary" had received bad news. In his hand he clutched

a crumpled paper, which he presently spread out upon his knee, and read:

"Both of them nabbed — jig's up. Have skipped. Lay low!"

This communication had been pressed into his hand by a sharp-faced, ragged street arab, who had met him, quite by accident, as he came out of "Brodie's." Valdeck smoothed the paper absently, and continued in deep meditation. The bubble had burst. It was his first real setback, and he took it hard. But he was not the man to lie down under misfortune. His ready brain had comprehended the full extent of the catastrophe. At once he recognized the impossibility of snatching his chestnuts from the fire, and turned to his plans for the future. Thank goodness, only half the New Orleans swag was in the despatch-box; the rest was already safely conveyed to London, where he could look it up on his arrival, and the Amsterdam firm stood ready to relieve him of his precious stones at a fairly decent figure. The question was now how, when, and where to strike for the other side. He turned over the possibilities. If his schemes had not so

disastrously failed at the last moment, he would have quietly embarked for the English capital and lost himself at once. He knew himself to be watched, thanks to the unforeseen raking up of the Breton episode; but he had outwitted keener hunters before, and had little or no fear of the police. Captain Brady was his friend, and if the worst came to the worst, he could depend on timely warning. Obviously, this time, though, the straightaway run would be useless. The Auray affair would be pressed half-heartedly, but to complicate matters, they were on to the Orleans trouble, and rewards were out for that — rewards sufficient to make the chase remunerative. There remained, then, as next choice, old Bordenten and the *Bonnie Dundee* bound for Glasgow. Bordenten, who believed him a whiskey smuggler, and heartily approved of the trade — a hint dropped to the effect that the authorities "wanted" him, would be taken by the captain as a suggestion that a stowaway would be no trouble. Valdeck saw himself quietly secreted, with a bottle of "white-horse" and a stock of back-number magazines, while the old sea-dog defied the law and indig-

nantly defended the honor of his native land. Like a prudent general, he had saved this particular avenue of escape for the day of need, and until now had bestowed favors on the grisly old salt without ever asking for a return.

The only trouble was the ten days that must be passed before the *Bonnie Dundee* was scheduled. If Bordenten would only take him on board now he reflected, but recalled at once that the gay Lothario was in Massachusetts visiting his American family.

Valdeck got up, rammed his hands deep in his pockets, and went to the window. He looked out upon the brick ugliness of an extension to the house next door, and a tumbled vista of back yards, separated by high white fences, upon which prowled and cuddled numberless cats of all colors and sizes. A network of clothes-lines cobwebbed the grassless gardens, and from them depended every sort and condition of underwear, from the rainbow-hued, belaced, China silk creations of the lady opposite, to the red flannels and numberless pinafores of No. 347's second-floor back. The hunted man took in the com-

mon-place surroundings at a glance, shrugged his shoulders, and, turning his back, began a slow pacing up and down his dingy cell.

Better stay where he was, at least for the present. He had his landlady by the scruff, so to speak. There were some spots in the career of the erstwhile *belle Nivernaise,* — but, no matter, — she was devoted. Until recently no suspicion had been attached to him, and since the horizon had so visibly darkened, he had taken good care to stick by his charming little rooms in East Fortieth Street, and not to jeopardize his present retreat. Decidedly this abode was as good as any, at least for a day or two, when he could quietly lose himself in the labyrinth of the Polish Jew quarter. Thank goodness, there was always this disguise open to him. For his mother had been a Pole, and a beauty in her day. The memory of Judith Grosifa was still green in the police and polite annals of Vienna.

Having decided upon his mode of procedure, he flung himself upon the bed and turned his mind to other details of his trouble. What of Eugenia, the faithful? He twisted uneasily.

Eugenia must have brought this down on her own head, he surmised. But how on earth had they connected her — a sudden light dawned on him, and he almost sat up. Of course — she was wanted for the Auray affair. Damn the business! The police had stumbled on the New Orleans stuff in their hunt for the accessory to the burglary in the hotel.

A wave of hate inundated him. That Claudel girl! — why should she have appeared now, at the most crucial point of his career, to turn his triumph to defeat — to break the wonderful thread of luck that had led him from fortune to fortune, till he had wealth, power, and honesty within his grasp? The superstitious element in his nature awoke and nudged him. There was something uncanny in all this — there was a sequence — Fate! Was it vengeance of the saints, for whom the countess's jewels had been intended? What else could have made him so foolish, so blind?

A clear vision of Victoria rose before his eyes — strong, vigorous, fearless. Into his brain her level, piercing look seemed to penetrate. He felt

the atmosphere of vitality, power, and satirical humor, that made up her personality and charm — felt it, and realized with a sudden shock, that there, of all the world, was the woman he might have loved — loved mightily and forever!

This sudden turn of his emotions startled his whole being; undreamt of, in his fight for survival, her splendid truth and physical energy had dominated his imagination. In spite of the trick he had played her, in spite of the mud he had thrown upon her, in spite of the fact that she it was who had set the machinery in motion that now threatened to crush him — he loved her! — yes, loved her! — and a savage, evil joy possessed him that her name had been coupled with his — her fair name brought close in contact with the soil and stain of his own! Victoria! the proud, the self-willed, the defiant! — at least the thread of their lives had met and crossed, and woven an episode.

"Victoria!"

He spoke the name aloud, rejoicing in its sound, that suggested trumpets and pageant.

Then his mood relaxed and he lay back, the vision of the girl's strong face still before him.

Her proud look was scornful and aloof. She seemed to thrust him back, back away from her. She was Vengeance Victrix! Justice outraged! A thrill as of impending danger electrified him.

He got up, and opening the door, called for Gustave in no pleasant tones.

A prompt "Oui, monsieur, tout de suite, monsieur!" came from below, and the waiter sprang up the steps and stood, all attention.

"Tell madame to send me up a bottle of whiskey," he ordered, shortly, and stepped back.

Gustave obeyed with alacrity, and presently returned with the bottle and a corkscrew. "A siphon? — no? A soda? — no? — bien!" and he skipped lightly from the lowering presence.

Valdeck poured out a full three fingers and tossed it down. He was not a drinking man, and he gagged at the sharp, burning taste. But his nerve had been taxed to the uttermost, and the stiff dose barely restored his mental equilibrium.

The early twilight had already settled down. The room was mysterious with dusk. Outside, the world was blue and strange, with squares

of yellow gaslight marking the illuminated windows. On the fences, sleep-sodden cats stretched and yawned, whisked a velvet paw over a drowsy face and started out upon the evening's wanderings. The clothes-lines sagged no longer above their wind-inflated loads. Now and again a jangling piano sent a shower of ill-tuned waltz-notes on the air, and somewhere in the distance a melancholy cornet wailed forth the familiar melody of the "Trompeter von Säkkingen," "Behüt' dich Gott, es war zu schön gewesen, behüt' dich Gott, es hat nicht sollen sein."

He shivered and turned once more to the whiskey-bottle.

Twilight settled into night, while smells of dinner cookery pervaded everything; sage, onions, a whiff of garlic swamped in a nameless vague *sauce piquant* aroma. From the restaurant on the first floor, noise and tumult arose. A busy clatter of dishes, knives and forks, as the first courses of the "fifty-cent-dinner, — wine-included," were being served. Then, animal appetites satisfied, a babel of tongues arose — louder and louder as the California claret began to take effect. Val-

deck could see it all as plainly as if he were occupying one of the little white-clothed tables now being wine-spotted by the hungry horde, — fat, paunchy men, with small, round features and pig eyes, who wielded dexterous knives, gesticulating, enthusiastic, with clothes-brush pompadours and bristly moustaches; elderly and overflowing matrons, with black lace bonnets and lavish breastpins, chaperoning slim slips of daughters of marriageable age, mildly and fearfully regarding a fiancé of papa's choosing — always a young man with a crumpled white waistcoat and a black satin tie, designed to imitate a "cravat," and adorned by a gilt safety-pin. Sometimes he was blond, sometimes brunette, but the uniform was invariable. There, too, the inevitable tenth-rate *viveur,* with pimpled face, gray hair, and a lean lecherousness, accompanied by his tenth-rate concomitant — a girl with painted cheeks, and bandeau tresses surmounted by a flaring velvet hat of faded plumage — the usual *habitués* of the French quarter restaurant café. Later there would be *petits verres* and dominoes until eleven. Valdeck knew it all to the sickening

point. He could not help contrasting it with the surroundings and life in which he had so lately figured. Brought up as he had been, in the lavish, careless luxury of his beautiful but nomadic mother, he had from earliest childhood consorted with men of fashion and women of that nameless world, where good manners are by no means unusual, and where luxury is a necessity. Later, as he grew old enough to be observing, and also a living remark upon the age of the lovely Judith Grosifa, he had been sent away to school in England, till the woeful day when the master learned of his antecedents and turned him out. Then two years at a Lycée in Paris, till at fourteen he found himself an orphan, with but little to his name, and that name uncertain. He had known it all in his life of three and thirty years — good and ill, poverty and riches, ambitions, hopes and fears, hardly a rung in life's ladder but at some time had supported him. He was used to changes, but somehow his gorge rose at his surroundings, and he longed desperately to be on a level with that distant image of all good — Victoria.

The thought of Philippa and her green boudoir intruded. He smiled half in amusement, half in scorn, and wondered at himself for choosing so poor a tool. What was it, unless remorseless Fate, that made him select that shallow, prating fool? Did he not know the vanity of woman well enough by this time to comprehend that she must be envied by some one before she can enjoy any possession — most of all a secret? He might have known that Philippa would talk too much, would overdo the part assigned to her, would trip and tangle him in his own net.

Truly it was Fate. And Fate had not yet done with him. He felt it again, that terrible haunting presence of danger. He shook it from him, and once more his mind went back to Victoria. He would put her right before he disappeared from her world and life.

He lit the gas, took out his pencil, and on the back of an envelope wrote:

"To ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: The story told by me and circulated by Miss Ford concerning the private character of Miss Claudel,

was a mere fiction, necessary to discredit her statements against me.

"LUCIUS VALDECK."

He read it over. He was rather proud of his English. He could write it fluently even if his accent in speaking betrayed the foreigner.

A tap at the door startled him. Hastily folding the scrap of paper, he thrust it in his pocket, and went to the door.

"Who's there?" he demanded, sharply.

"Gustave. Does not monsieur desire dinner?"

Valdeck hesitated. "Yes," he decided. "Bring me something here — anything."

"*Bien,* monsieur."

The servant knocked at the adjoining room.

"Does madame desire dinner?"

"Yes," answered a woman's voice. "Some toast and coffee."

"*Bien,* madame," and Gustave's heavy tread announced his descent into the region of edibles.

"So," considered Valdeck, "the room next door is occupied. It is the first time. The voice is educated. Let us see our neighbor."

He cautiously slipped to the keyhole, and, stooping, tried to reconnoitre. No use, the keyhole was closed by something, possibly the key. At this time everything and everybody boded danger until otherwise proven. He listened attentively for any sound, however slight, that might betray the age, nature, or occupation of the woman next door. All was silent.

Presently the waiter returned, knocked, and was admitted. He could hear the soft swish of a silk petticoat as its owner moved toward the door. But there was no response to Gustave's voluble comments. Then the door closed again, and the knocking was repeated, this time at his own room. He opened to the summons and watched the officious little Frenchman as he set down the tray.

"Number 12 was taken, then," Valdeck remarked, "and who might the lady be?"

"Oh, elderly, elderly," Gustave commented, as if to allay any hopes on the part of Number 14. "A woman at least of fifty, and of a silentness, not to say abruptness. Would it be believed, she arrived with only two hand-bags, and appeared not at all to care what she spent. Had

it been, now, the little sisters of Number 10, one might understand, but this white-haired woman — and in mourning, and of a deepness! — truly she wore as much crêpe as the funeral pomps — "

"What's her name?" inquired Valdeck, impatiently.

"Oh, a Madame Duval. Very ordinary name — from Marseilles — very ordinary place. Would monsieur have cognac with his coffee? — no? — Would monsieur have the obligeance to put the tray outside the door when finished? — a thousand thanks," and Gustave pounded his way downstairs once more.

Valdeck, left alone, dismissed the thought of his neighbor, as he took a long drink from the now half-emptied bottle. His ears were ringing and his oppression and anxiety lifted a little. He ate with more relish than he had expected, and pushing back his chair, lighted a cigarette. Gradually the world receded, the blue rings of smoke spread and hung gently in the air, his brain was tranced in a not unpleasant numbness. He was still conscious that he was menaced in some way, but he no longer clung to details. Only the face of

Victoria, haloed in cigarette smoke, looked vividly down on him. He stretched himself, and yawned. The liquor drowsed through his veins. He was very, very tired, and glad to forget his troubles. He disapproved of drinking, particularly at crucial moments. It was a very pernicious habit — but — after all — when one's thoughts were all disagreeable, why not muddle them?

The noise had ceased down-stairs. No longer the clink of china, nor the wrangling of argumentative voices, no longer the cheerful shout of Gustave or Hortense, down the dumb-waiter, "*Deux bœuf à la mode, trois haricots, une demi-tasse.*" He fumbled for his watch, and glanced at the time. Half-past ten. Stumblingly he rose, and made his way to the window, threw up the sash, and gazed uncertainly out. Across the way silhouettes came and went upon the drawn-down shades; further on he saw the blurred outline of the lady of the amazing lingerie. The stars overhead shone with a palpitating, uneven light. But, oh, how good was the fresh night air upon his face. He glanced once more at the bed. It was inviting with its red eider-down pillows — he would give up and

go to sleep. He undressed recklessly, throwing his garments, or leaving them where they dropped, secured his door, took a final swig of whiskey, and after turning off the gas, tumbled into bed.

The night wore on. The last patron was turned out, the last bolt fastened. Madame Guisard had removed all the pins in her edifice of hair and lace. Gustave had neatly plaited the napkins for the next day's tables, and Hortense, candle in hand, had yawned her way to her little attic cubby-hole.

The outer world, too, had gone to rest. Only the cats now crawled and fought along the gutters and on the narrow fence-tops. At intervals the bells of the little French church rang out the hour, which the Skye terrier of the lady opposite heralded with a shrill howl. Even the distant buzz of the elevated was stilled.

Valdeck slept heavily. The stroke of two still hung vibrating in the air, when the communicating door between 12 and 14 opened slowly.

The light burned brightly in the woman's room and showed her dark form sharply. In her hand she carried a ring and skeleton keys. She paused

"THE LIGHT BURNED BRIGHTLY IN THE WOMAN'S ROOM AND SHOWED HER DARK FORM SHARPLY."

a moment, listening, and then silently turned back. She was small, thin, and clad in mourning-garments that accentuated her peculiarities. Under heavy brows her great black eyes burned with a deep, concentrated radiance that seemed to eat into her face, so consuming they were. Her hair, once as black as night, was striped with white, one great strand springing from her left temple contrasting strangely with the coil at the back of her head. She moved with a curious uncertainty, as though her actions were governed by unregulated, instantaneous impulses.

On the bureau lay her opened hand-bag, and upon the marble table-top, sole ornament of the room, stood a silver figure of St. Anne. The woman advanced to the statue, knelt with fervent devotion, crossing herself over and over, muttering and questioning. Suddenly she arose and stood listening, nodding her head as if in acquiescence to directions given. A deeper fire glowed in her eyes. Catching up the silver figure, she kissed its foot passionately, and then turned to her hand-bag. From it she took a cloth and a small bottle, smiling wisely all the while. Stealth-

ily she crept into the adjoining room, made her way to the bed, and stood over the unconscious sleeper.

Valdeck slept on, his usual acute senses drugged into stupidity.

She leaned over him long, as if to make sure.

"Yes," she murmured, "that is the man! He is the one who was pointed out to me — he is the one I have followed, and the good St. Anne says I am right."

Once more she nodded gravely, then, with swift, mechanical movements, she inundated the cloth, and clapped it over the upturned face. There was a short struggle, a gasp, and the sleeper passed into the blinding, buzzing unconsciousness of chloroform.

Deliberately the woman went about her work. She shut down the open window carefully, then, drawing the blind, she lighted the gas. Coldly, with no wavering now, she closed the transom and stuffed the crack beneath the door with the overcoat, pushing its folds close, that no air might penetrate. There remained only her own door. Valdeck's silk handkerchief and muffler were upon

the table. Taking both, she laid them lengthwise about the wooden door in such fashion that in shutting the door the tiny crack would be sealed.

A moan from the bed brought her quickly over. She bent above Valdeck for a moment, lifted the cloth, and contemplated the handsome face with a look of inhuman satisfaction. Again she saturated the bandage, laying it back almost tenderly. The bottle itself she put down upon the pillow. Raising her hand, she deliberately turned out the gas, and waited a moment before turning it on in full.

The room slowly filled with poisonous vapor. She stood, till her brain was dizzy, watching the form upon the bed. At last, as if tearing herself away from some entrancing spectacle, she turned to her own room, carefully shutting and locking the door. The last avenue of ventilation was closed.

The mad countess sat down to listen — and wait.

CHAPTER X.

PHILIPPA was humbled in the dust, metaphorically speaking. Literally she had tried to throw herself at her aunt's feet in her despair, but Mrs. Ford, averse to theatricals for home consumption, merely remarked that "in tragedy she preferred Duse and Mrs. Fiske." This heartlessness had the effect to precipitate a Niagara of tears.

Mrs. Ford waited quietly until the paroxysm passed, to take up the thread of her remarks.

"I suppose you are aware that this disreputable affair of yours has been kept from the papers only by the greatest effort, and by the use of money and influence. That's why you are in this house instead of the jail. I'm sure I don't know why I allow you to stay here — I'm by far too soft-hearted. You will remember I told

you I would have nothing to do with your miserable case if you saw fit to disobey me."

Philippa groaned and pressed her burning palms to her aching head. Ever since she had been released, and accompanied to her home by Commissioner Holes, Mr. Pendle, and her aunt, she had been in a state of frantic despair, which was not counterfeit.

"What I want to know is this," the drum-major went on, "are you going to obey me now? I shall give you this one more chance. I will take you in hand if you promise implicit obedience — implicit! — you understand!"

Philippa caught at the straw. "I will, I will — anything — everything, I promise!"

"So you have frequently said, but I have failed to note the absolute fulfilment of your vows. Now it's come to this: either you let me run this thing without question, or you are 'done for' socially. Of course, you can go to Europe with an elderly chaperone. Malta is a good place — with your good looks you ought to pick up some bored baronet with a bank account."

Philippa sat up on the lounge and pushed the

tumbled hair from her eyes. There were new lines of suffering in her childish face, a naive grace, a piteous appeal, that had even softened the buckrammed, tight-buttoned heart of her aunt, and drawn from her this last offer of help.

"I give you my solemn word of honor," she said, "I'll obey you in every particular. I've been a fool, and I know it. I'm in an awful hole, and if you'll help me out, I'll — I'll — there isn't anything I won't do."

"And if I lay down a plan of action, you'll live up to it, will you?"

"I will, oh, I will!" Philippa wailed.

"It's understood, then, is it? Then let us go over the ground."

Mrs. Ford rose and made a slow tour of the room in silence; her gaze snapped from one object to another, as if this were, in fact, the ground she was going over. An amused gleam lit her cold eyes as she noted the familiar sham: the soulful "*sanguines*," the masterpieces of Burne-Jones, Rossetti, and Watts, that adorned the walls of the room, because its occupant felt she ought to admire them. The rows of books

upon the shelves, unappreciated and unread. The one true note was self-adoration. Photographs of Philippa were scattered broadcast — Philippa standing, trailing a long-stemmed rose in a well-posed hand; Philippa sitting, with her arms draped over a huge, carved "studio" chair; Philippa in evening-dress, in walking-dress, in her riding-habit, with a bulldog, an open book, a bunch of daisies, a garden-hat, and in four kinds of fancy dress. Mrs. Ford looked them over with undisguised scorn.

"How absolutely vain you are!" she said, slowly.

It was on the tip of her listener's tongue to remark on "beams and motes," but she gulped in silence. This was no time for retaliation. Her position was too insecure.

"But," the drum-major resumed, wrapping the belaced folds of her dressing-gown about her ample person, "as I said, let us look at the situation. Two things are paramount: you must own yourself mistaken about Victoria — that will be easy; and you must do it amply and fully. In that way you will win the silence of old Morris

Courncey and Fanshaw concerning your dinner episode." Her face hardened as she said the words, "If you will remember, I warned you that very afternoon to let matters drop between you and that impostor. But, to continue. You must release Morton at once. He knows too much for you to try to hold him. You must be repentant, humble. You must appeal to his chivalrous nature to save appearances for you. I think we can withdraw those wretched letters of Valdeck's from publicity. Then, to the outer world your attitude must be that of 'injured angel.' Valdeck interested you in what you thought a noble charity. You wanted to help — your interest in slum-work is well known" — Mrs. Ford sniffed as she referred to her ward's spasmodic and fashionable zeal for the water-front and the Bowery. "And now, I have the one great piece of luck to tell you of — the thing that saves you — the only thing that could have saved you. Valdeck left a confession exonerating Victoria, and incidentally you."

Philippa gasped and sat up. "He's escaped

then, has he?" Involuntarily her face shone with relief.

"He committed suicide. It was in all the papers yesterday." Mrs. Ford's back was turned toward Philippa. She did not see the ghastly pallor that spread over the girl's face. When she turned, her charge's head was buried in the pillows of the sofa, and she went on with her information. "You are the luckiest creature I ever heard of. To think of his having the decency to put himself out of the way. He turned on the gas after carefully blocking up all the chinks of his room, and, I suppose because he was afraid his nerve would fail him, he chloroformed himself when he lay down to die. It seems it happened in some cheap little French hotel over on Twenty-sixth Street, and it wasn't found out till early next morning, when the woman who had occupied the adjoining room left the house because she claimed the smell of gas was unendurable.

"After she'd paid her bill and gone, the waiter went up-stairs and found the halls positively as-

phyxiating. He located the fumes, broke in the door — and there was Valdeck — dead!"

Philippa gasped.

"Dead!" went on Mrs. Ford. "And in his pocket was found a slip of paper on which, written in pencil, was a statement that his accusations made to you against Victoria were unfounded and merely made for the purpose of discrediting the Auray story. It was really superfluous, for her statement has been fully substantiated, but I suppose he grew sentimental over his impending death, or the whiskey, for he had been drinking heavily during the evening; a bottle nearly three-quarters empty was found by his bed. Now, you see, with Valdeck dead, the principal reason for pursuing the affair has been removed. Of course, the State will have its case against the woman for complicity, but as she confessed on hearing of her accomplice's suicide, and they are in a fair way to recover all the jewels stolen from New Orleans, there won't be much of an examination. Your appearance will be quite nominal — and those letters once returned, there is plenty of proof forthcoming that you were merely a tool."

Philippa winced in spite of her prostration. Then there flashed through her throbbing brain another thought. His last care had been to exonerate Victoria — no thought of her. But perhaps he did not wish to drag her name with his to a dishonored grave. In a tumult of sensations, she wavered back and forth, now filled with hatred of Valdeck and his deceptions, now crushed and broken-hearted over his death. Her will was in abeyance, and her many-sided mind, uncontrolled, followed with exaggerated vision the myriad suggestions that in normal conditions float half-formed in the consciousness. She was only vaguely aware of the drone of her aunt's voice, as she continued to pour wisdom upon the unheeding air.

The maid entered presently, with a note for Philippa. Aroused and brought back to vivid consciousness, she glanced at the address in Morton's clean-cut, characteristic hand.

It was a request, couched in formal terms, for an interview some time during the day.

Dismissing the maid with a nod, she handed the missive to her aunt, who glanced over it.

"Well," she demanded, "when will you see him?"

Philippa looked up wearily. "Don't you think you could manage this better?" she suggested. "Tell him I'm too ill to see him. You can say I'm so heart-broken over the unintentional wrong I did Victoria, you know."

The drum-major nodded. "I think so," she mused, "I think so. You had better stay in bed for the next few days, then we'll admit a few of your friends, and you can tell them that you must set Victoria right, that it's the only thing you are living for — that you are really too miserable to see any one, but you must undo the wrong you have done. Then, of course, I will deplore your trustfulness, and declaim against the creature's infamous use of your charitable nature." The drum-major positively smiled. The old war-horse of social diplomacy cried ha! ha! afar off, scenting battle. With a sweep of the ornate dressing-gown, the lady settled herself before Philippa's spindle-legged writing-desk, and drew out a sheet of becrested note-paper. The arms, crest, and motto "Fidelitas" were simply

embossed in the heavy, white paper, and also adorned the flap of the envelope. From the recess where the creamy piles lay spread, arose a faint perfume of violets.

With strong, scratching gestures, Mrs. Ford penned her little note:

"MR. MORTON CONWAY,

"UNIVERSITY CLUB.

"MY DEAR MR. CONWAY: — Philippa is, I fear, very ill. The doctors tell me that unless she gets some rest she may develop brain-fever. It is, therefore, impossible for her to answer your note or receive you in person. For the present I must be her proxy. If you will call at once, I should be pleased to tell you the particulars of her condition and her wishes for the future."

She signed with a decided upward tilt, and added the date and address — reread the epistle first to herself, then to Philippa, and rang for the maid. "And now, my dear," she added, rising and standing before the dressing-table, "I must dress to see him."

She contemplated her florid reflection with dignified satisfaction, picked up the artless Philippa's powder-puff, and discreetly subdued the violet-veined tone of her large, well-modelled Roman nose. She gently rubbed a tinge of mascaro upon her already heavy brows, and with a moistened finger removed the particles of powder from about her blue, incisive eyes, turning her head from side to side in contemplation of the "undulations" of the elaborate coiffure now protected by a net to retain its precision till the dowager should sally forth to an admiring public.

Philippa watched her aunt with disguised disgust. "Great, ugly thing! She thinks she's a beauty," she commented, inwardly, for Philippa loathed vanity in others. She turned her head, gasped with the pain the movement caused her aching eyeballs, arose, and walked gingerly to the violet-hung bed.

"I'm going to lie down," she said. "I do feel so ill — tell Marie to come to me. I want my lavender-water, and the shades pulled down. I wonder if I shall die!"

"You've got a nervous headache — you won't

die," said Mrs. Ford, scornfully. "Well, I'll leave you to your favorite contemplation of yourself — much joy may you get out of it this time!"

With her silken gown flying about her like waving banners, the drum-major marched to the door, which she closed with a bang that made Philippa start with pain, and proceeded down the hallway to her own apartments. In its seclusion she was pushed and packed into her precise tailor costume, the net removed from her hair, her finger-nails duly polished, and her fingers loaded with a choice assortment of rings. Then, with a last glance at her image in the pier-glass, she descended to the drawing-room to await the coming of her ex-nephew-to-be. She moved about, busily readjusting Sèvres, Dresden figures, and Dutch-silver toys. She rearranged her collection of miniatures in the glass-topped show-table, and wound up the gilt and enamel clock on the mantelshelf. Mrs. Ford was always busy with some superfluity when she was not engaged in her favorite pursuit of advancing her social importance.

The butler passed through from the dining-room to answer the electric ring of the door-bell.

"If that is Mr. Conway, Charles," she said, "show him in here, and remember I am at home to no one else for the present."

The butler bowed, and went on.

A moment later Morton was introduced into the discreet twilight of the drawing-room and the presence of Mrs. Ford, whose face had suddenly become clouded and grave. She held out her hand frankly, but forbore to smile.

"First, let me tell you, that we hope Philippa may escape the consequences of her collapse. She has at last fallen asleep, under the influence of opiates, it is true."

Morton nodded. "I am glad to hear it," he said, coldly.

"She is in a very desperate state of mind," the aunt went on. "She raves about the wrong she has unwittingly done Victoria, and fairly implores and begs to have her friends admitted that she may tell them of her fearful mistake. I really did not suspect Philippa of so much conscience.

She is frantic now that she realizes that she was so completely misled."

Morton's face relaxed a trifle.

"The whole thing has been a frightful shock to her. She put absolute confidence in Valdeck, and he was clever enough to convince her he was terribly in love with her. Of course, she was a fool to listen to him, or permit him to speak at all, but she was flattered, as, indeed, what girl would not be? She told me from time to time of his unfortunate passion for her, and deplored it. She hoped by assisting him in what she thought was a charitable enterprise, she would be helping him to a readier acceptance of his hopeless position — aiding him to fix his mind, as it were, on a laudable aim and end of life. What that aim was, we all know."

Morton bowed.

"He enjoined her to absolute secrecy when he entrusted her with the treasure he could no longer safely keep himself, and allayed all her questionings by this story of a watch being kept upon his movements. If you could see how broken and

distressed she is, you would, I am sure, forgive her."

Morton smiled grimly. He was not to be taken in with the half-truth now. But the picture of the distressed Philippa brought up affectionate images. He remembered her innocent eyes, her trick of blushing, her childlike manner — and his anger slipped away from him. He knew her for what she was, yet felt sorry for her in her trouble.

"Of course, Mrs. Ford," he said, directly and simply, "there can be no question of an engagement between us now. That was the matter I most particularly wished to set before you. As it was never made public, there will be no comment. But this matter of Valdeck has awakened me from my dream, and I must, in duty to myself and to Philippa, relieve her — " He broke off, hesitating.

Mrs. Ford nodded. "I quite understand, though in the matter of that unfortunate dinner, I believe her quite innocent, except for following a foolish girl's impulse. He induced her to go there, that he might, so he said, in perfect se-

curity, tell her certain secrets concerning this 'Polish Educational League.' I fancy he wished her to be compromised by appearances, that he might obtain a hold over her in case she should discover the real nature of the 'society.' As to Gagano's, of course Philippa had never even heard of the place, and hadn't the remotest notion of its reputation. She trusted to Valdeck not to take her to any objectionable resort. I am greatly incensed against her myself, Mr. Conway, for this, but I try to do the girl justice."

Morton bethought him of sundry allusions of Philippa's, and doubted her complete ignorance of the name and nature of the infamous little restaurant, but he said nothing.

"For the sake of old times," Mrs. Ford went bravely on, "I want you to help me save the child's reputation. Do what you can to prevent this miserable story from getting into circulation. People who do not know Philippa's character as we do, might misjudge her in the matter of the dinner if it should become known. I hope we may be able to prevent the letters she gave in evidence from being made public. She has, I find,

other notes written to her before he made his dastardly profession of love for her, which show identically the same thing — his use of his victim's interest in charity to induce her to assist him. We will substitute these earlier letters, which cover the same ground, for the later ones she so unwisely permitted to be read. It was her very innocence that made her careless. She never dreamed that any one would imagine that she returned his devotion."

Morton smiled inwardly. The farce of it began to appeal to him. But after all, why not protect Philippa? She was a woman — and he had loved her once — how long ago, and absurd it seemed.

"Of course," he said, "nothing shall become known through me, and my uncle, Mr. Courncey, assured me that if Victoria were fully cleared, nothing should be learned from him or Mr. Fanshaw. If the substitution of the letters can be made, I see no reason why anything but sympathy should be attached to your niece."

Mrs. Ford drew a long breath. She was accomplishing her work most skilfully. Never

again would there be such a perfectly successful coat of whitewash.

"And Victoria Claudel?" she asked, tentatively. "She has been the injured party, you know — and women are so hard upon each other." This last remark completed the irony of the situation.

Morton smiled. "Victoria never harmed a fly in all her life. She's too much of a man to strike a fallen enemy, and, besides, once her own character is cleared, she'll never think about the matter again — she has too many things of more importance to employ her mind, — she's too busy."

The lady looked incredulous. "I hardly think," she said, sententiously, "that you understand women, Mr. Conway."

Morton rose. "I don't pretend to, Mrs. Ford, I assure you. But Victoria is particularly a tomboy, and I think I can answer for her mental progressions. I assure you that you will really be quite annoyed by the very little importance she'll attach to it all, once the clouds have blown over. I think we quite understand each other now, Mrs. Ford. I thank you for receiving me, and the

way you have permitted me to explain my very unpleasant and delicate mission."

The drum-major rose with stately and studied grace. "I am sure, Mr. Conway, my niece ought to be very grateful to you for your assurances of good-will. Of course, she knows nothing of my intervention on her behalf. She is too ill to have painful subjects broached at all. And I promise you in her name and my own, that Miss Claudel shall have thorough and complete vindication."

They shook hands warmly. Mrs. Ford very much as if she were conferring a cross of honor upon a valorous warrior. Morton, with an amused delight at the comedy. He bowed himself out, and in the hall passed Ethel Tracy, who nodded sweetly and inquired with an air of arch knowledge for the latest news of Philippa. Morton's amusement deepened as he foresaw the scene to follow between the artless curiosity of the girl and the wily generalship of the drum-major.

"You had better see Mrs. Ford, she will tell you all the particulars, Miss Tracy," he said.

"She is in the drawing-room — go right in. I know she will wish to see you."

"Is that you, Ethel, dear?" Mrs. Ford's voice sounded mellow through the portières. "Come in; poor Philippa is very ill to-day, but I fancy she will insist on seeing you."

The slim figure of the girl disappeared between the curtains, and Morton heard the hostess's resounding kiss, as she drew the fly into her parlor, and began diligently spinning the web of poor Philippa's innocent heart-break about her willing listener.

CHAPTER XI.

ONE stormy February afternoon, some two months later, the wet snow smothered the air and lay, sodden and gray, on the steaming streets. Early twilight lurked in the sky, and the street-lamps, giving out a dim, yellow haze, made the half-lights more confusing.

In Mrs. Durham's rooms the lamps were not yet lighted. In the dusk the four occupants of easy chairs luxuriated in comfortable companionship. Three cigarette-lights punctuated the mysterious penumbra — Morton's, Victoria's, and Sonia Palintzka, Countess Krempelkin's. Mrs. Durham did not indulge; instead she chewed her cork-tipped penholder.

"Must you go to Washington on Wednesday, Sonia?" inquired Victoria, beseechingly. "You've only been here a week."

"I'm afraid so," the countess answered, smil-

ing. "You see, since my older sister married, there's no one to do the honors, and that sort of thing. If it weren't for that, I should still be in Paris, or next door to your studio. But there is not a female soul at the embassy, and my father is becoming restive."

"Oh, dear!" said Victoria.

"Now suppose," Sonia continued, "you and Mrs. Durham pack your boxes and come with me for a month or two, or three — what do you say, old lady?"

The old lady ceased chewing the penholder. "Well, if Victoria will pull out for a week or so, I will — but I haven't any clothes to speak of —"

"Don't speak of them, then."

"You're doing me out of my pet lounging-place," Morton growled. "What am *I* to do for my woman's club?"

"You might come, too. Aren't you jealous? Aren't you afraid to let Victoria be seen among all our good-looking, uniformed Russians?" demanded Sonia, as one with a grievance.

"No," broke in Mrs. Durham, with annoyance

in her tone; "he isn't — he isn't jealous at all. Did you ever see two people so beautifully suited, who simply don't *want* to get married? They *won't* fall in love — it's disgusting!"

"I rather like it myself," said Victoria; "it saves such lots of bother. Now, it will all arrange itself quite simply. Mort, there, will marry some fool or other who will hate me, and forbid him to drop in except on 'Thursdays from four till six,' and he'll dote on her and accept the situation. Then, I'll probably marry somebody who will beat me, and I shall like it, and it will make Morty so mad he won't be able to come around any more. Then we'll each think how nice the other one was all our lives."

"I can't marry a boy," Morton protested. "And if any one tried to beat Victoria, it wouldn't be Victoria who would go to the hospital. The fact of the matter is, the only thing for her is a nice, slender, yellow, fuzzy-haired pet from Madame Despard's kennels. She could ruffle it and love it, and go right on her rejoiceful way without worrying it or herself or any one else."

"Oh, don't!" exclaimed Sonia. "I can fairly

see myself kicking the thing out of the way whenever I should come into the room."

"Why worry about the inevitable," murmured Victoria, as she lit another cigarette and flung the finished one dexterously on the hearth. "I never cared sentimentally, that is, but once. He was a nice fellow, and rather clever; but he didn't think I liked him and was too proud to inquire, and I — well, I was too proud to inform him — so — well — that's all — "

"Who was it?" demanded Mrs. Durham, bristling with curiosity. "And you, Victoria! I should have expected you to come right out and speak your mind."

"So should I," said Victoria; "but somehow I wouldn't work that way — there must have been something wrong with the machinery."

"I think he was an idiot!" exclaimed Sonia.

"I think so too," said Victoria.

"Here is one of the incongruities of life," Morton observed, regretfully. "Three stunning women gathered together, and not a romance among them."

"But I've just finished one," Mrs. Durham murmured, modestly.

"Oh," said Victoria, "it's finished, is it? You've been working like a beaver on that book. What is the title to be?"

Mrs. Durham bit her pen, and an expression only to be classed as "grin" came over her face — the grin of a bad, small child — but the expression was lost in the dusk.

"It's to be called 'Whitewash,'" she drawled.

"You're not!" exclaimed Victoria.

"Yes, I am," said Mrs. Durham, "and you're all in it — every one."

"I call that a mean advantage to take of one's friends. And who, pray, is the heroine?"

"I shall leave that to the discriminating public. But I can assure you the portraiture is faithful, and I've written the story verbatim. I haven't added a thing — in fact, I've left out some."

"Thank heavens!" sighed Morton. "What have you cut out?"

"Well, Madame Château-Lamion's final performance. It was so spectacular that the modern

novel couldn't stand for it unless I set the whole story back a few hundred years."

"But," objected Sonia, "from our Russian standpoint there's nothing so remarkable in that. It was a well-executed vengeance. The lady goes to the prison to identify the former maid — which she does, and promptly shoots the woman. Then foolish doctors declare the lady insane, and lock her up. *I* think she showed determination and good sense. She knew that the court, at best, would only condemn the creature as an accessory. The countess wanted blood for blood, and, besides, she believed she was fulfilling a Christian obligation—which she probably was. That whole episode appears to me far more plausible than the usual run of facts."

"It's picturesque enough, of course," said Victoria, "but you know it's melodrama, pure and simple, and the Muse doesn't want to be classed by the unthinking as rantish. What would Madame Despard's souls say to such goriness and undue display of the untender passion?"

"How do you end it, then?" asked Sonia.

"If you will light a lamp, or turn on a light,

I'll read you the last few pages, provided, Morty, that you go away. I haven't the face to speak out before you. I can't help feeling I've taken an unfair advantage — particularly of your affairs. I feel guilty — but, with Victoria, I will just brazen it out."

Mrs. Durham arose, fumbled in her *escritoire,* and returned with several closely written sheets. She settled herself cosily beside her lamp, and waved a good-by to Morton, who departed reluctantly and under strong compulsion.

"This is the first half of the last chapter," she began:

"The babel of voices had reached a climax, the flower and palm-embowered rooms were jammed to suffocation with monkeys, parrots, and peacocks — your pardon, I mean well-dressed men, charming débutantes, and glittering matrons. — Tea, consisting of every variety of drinkable liquid, was being served by despairing waiters, struggling to fray a passage between velvet trains and lace flounces.

"A lady in black and sables, standing near the mantelpiece, looked on with interest. Beside

her lounged an elderly gentleman in immaculate frock coat and waistcoat, regarding the crowd through a pince-nez that gave him an aristocratic hauteur of expression, for it refused to stay on if he lowered the angle of his head. The lady was no other than the Marchioness of Kilgare, formerly Fanny Colcourt of New York, returned now for the first time in many years.

"'That girl by the punch-bowl,' explained Mr. Belgrave Gerome (the former fiancé and present Virgil of the coroneted Fanny), 'that girl is Bella Claxmore, Belle Carter's daughter, — you remember her, don't you? The tall woman in chinchilla and gray is Mortmeer Dent's second wife.'

"'Really,' exclaimed Lady Kilgare, as she elevated her lorgnette with a well-bred insolence. 'How could Mortmeer marry such a frump after suffering the loss of that sweet bit of Dresden — Molly!'

"'A million or so,' said Gerome.

"'Ah, I see — trade, of course. Forgive me, I was in London for the moment. What was it? Cutlery, cookstoves, or calico?'

"'Patent medicine, I believe. She was a Bently, of "Bently's Best Bilious Bitters."'

"'Ah, I see. Poor Mortmeer!'

"'That lean young man is Toppy Van Deuxer, 2d. Toppy, 1st, married Clara Taguerra — you must recall her. She was that immensely rich Cuban planter's daughter that the Holders chaperoned and married off. I heard that they received a very nice per cent. on the "dot."'

"'I remember her,' the marchioness nodded. 'She was a charmingly pretty thing. Who is the personage in green? I seem to recognize her.'

"'That's Mrs. Trevy-Portman.'

"'Good heavens! I must dissemble. I knew her ever so slightly as Patty Winston, and now she is chasing me every day — title, I suppose — leaves cards and flowers. I *hope* she won't see me, — now my back is toward her. Dear me, what a pretty girl!' This last remark was caused by the entrance of Philippa, ravishingly gowned and more charming than ever; with her loomed Mrs. Ford, gorgeous in cadet blue and astrachan.

"'That,' said the guide, as he acknowledged

Philippa's bow, "is Miss Ford and her aunt. The old lady is a pusher and a scrouger, but the girl is really a very delightful young person, a refreshing change from the average. She is not over vain, she's good-hearted, she's well-read, and has excellent taste, also can talk intelligently — quite a rara avis.'

"'Really? She seems very popular; people are fairly falling over one another to speak with her.'

"'She is just home from Paris, you see; been away three months — it's quite a story; do you want to hear it?'

"'Yes, — that's a nice frock.'

"'Well, some little time ago, a foreigner came here, named Valdeck. He had managed somehow to obtain letters from the New Orleans Pointues — '

"'The Château-Lamion affair — oh, yes, — is *that* the Miss Ford? Heavens! yes, it was a nine days' wonder even in London, — quite sensational. Dear me — '

"'Well, you know poor Philippa was taken in by the charitable side of her nature. Inci-

dentally Valdeck told I don't know what ridiculous scandal about Victoria Claudel, who, you know, happened to recognize him for what he was — a burglar. He wanted to gain time, and in this ingenious way made a most excellent spy of the innocent Philippa. Of course you know the extraordinary dénouement — Valdeck's suicide, the murder of the maid and Madame Lamion's final incarceration "à Charenton."

"'When Philippa found out the real state of affairs, she was wild that she should have helped to hurt her friend's character, for, girl-like, she had talked, and the whole set was quite agog over it. She made the fullest possible reparation; insisted on seeing the people to whom she had repeated the slander, and was most contrite and humble. But Victoria Claudel never would forgive her, and Morton Conway, whom we all thought engaged to Philippa, has quite dropped away. People say Victoria took him deliberately — they are inseparable now.'

"'So *that's* the Miss Ford,' said the marchioness again. 'I don't wonder that they make such

a buzz over her. It seems odd what you tell me of Miss Claudel. I never knew her to bear malice. And as to Mr. Conway, they have always been friends. She used to show me his letters when we were in Paris.'

"'You know her, then?'

"'Naturally. She is the Countess Palintzka's most intimate friend.'

"'Ah!' said Gerome, with a slightly deferential tone.

"His companion looked up amused. 'And why not, pray? She's the best born American I know. She could use her arms by real right if she chose, and show quarterings enough to make her a chanoinesse; but she doesn't think of anything but her work.'

"'Her work?'

"'Dear me, yes. You've heard of Camille Descartes, haven't you? Of course. Well, you don't mean to tell me that you didn't know that was her nom de plume! She writes in French, you know. But this Miss Ford — I can't imagine her anything but a beautiful injured angel. Look

at those violet eyes of hers! But then, of course, Victoria must have been exasperated.'

"'I can assure you Victoria is very generally blamed,' said Gerome. 'Miss Ford was very ill immediately after the affair, and every one says it was brain fever, brought on by Miss Claudel's refusal to see her. She left for Europe quite broken in health, and this is her first appearance since her return. *Town Topics* had it last week that her engagement was rumored to young Lord Pelham —'

"'Dopey Pelham!' exclaimed Lady Kilgare, 'impossible! He is a little, bald-headed, dried-up rat of a man, with a stutter, you know, and the *worst* manners. To be sure he has the title and a sweetly pretty country house with no end of gee-gees, and the old place in Devonshire, but he's — dear me — quite the simpleton!

"'Has that Trevey-Portman woman gone? Am I safe if I turn my face toward the table? Yes? Ah, that's better. Why, there's Celia van Cordlier — I must speak with her!' and with that she dismissed Miss Ford and her affairs from her aristocratic mind."

A silence as Mrs. Durham ceased reading.

"You don't approve?" she asked, with raised eyebrows.

"No," said Victoria, "I don't! The whole thing is horridly personal."

"But I've changed all the names," pleaded the authoress. "I read them to you with the real ones just for a lark."

"As if everybody couldn't place the thing!"

"But I've made you very nice, Victoria."

"And how have you treated me?" demanded Sonia.

"Excellently, — I've only been truthful."

"Thank goodness for that," Victoria groaned. "You have saved us and punished yourself. Your reputation as a realist will be ruined, and we shall escape. I breathe again — and so would Philippa, if she knew. Her beautiful coat of immaculate whitewash will remain 'unspotted' — by the world."

"I disapprove of slang and puns, but in this instance we'll let it pass," said Mrs. Durham.

THE END.

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